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Society in early Stuart England¹

Historiography

Changing trends in writing on the social history of early modern England

Until the early 1970s, social history held an inferior position amongst English historians. Its reputation was tarnished by the description of it by G. M. Trevelyan, writing in the early twentieth century, as 'history with the politics left out'. This phrase was often used to dismiss social history as unworthy of the interest of professional academic historians. However, from the early 1970s there was a marked improvement in the academic reputation of social history as social historians learned the value of using theoretical concepts and statistical techniques drawn from other disciplines. Historians who approached the history of society in these ways were rightly excited at the prospect of revealing aspects of the lives of people in the past, like their marriage patterns, kinship ties, social and geographical mobility – even their sex lives – that it was once thought would always remain hidden.

¹ I was much happier making fundamental changes to this chapter than I was fundamentally revising Chapter 1. Unlike economic history, social history is buzzing. Its fast-moving nature makes it difficult to come to clear conclusions in a book like this, but I have done my best to point out what social historians have achieved in recent years and where they are taking the subject.

Some of the achievements of social historians writing in the 1970s and 1980s are explained in the first part of this chapter.

The year 1990 was another turning point in the study of social history, marked by the publication of Patrick Collinson's *De Republica Anglorum: Or, History with the Politics Put Back*. In it Collinson argued that there are major links between the study of society and the study of politics, and exploring these links has been a major task of historians like Keith Wrightson, Steve Hindle, Mike Braddick and Mark Goldie since the beginning of the 1990s.

This exploration is ongoing, but some of its major achievements so far are outlined in the second part of this chapter.

The achievements of social historians writing in the 1970s and 1980s

Their major achievement was to cause long-held assumptions about the nature of early modern English society to be abandoned. No longer is it possible to hold an idealized, romanticized picture of a society which was markedly different from that in England during and after the Industrial Revolution: a country in which people rarely travelled far afield and married, lived and died in the villages in which they were born; a society in which kinship ties based on large, extended families were much stronger than in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain; and a society made up of contented, introverted communities, in which local concerns were more important than what was going on elsewhere in the country.

Migration and mobility

The first and most startling discovery that has destroyed these stereotypes of pre-industrial England is that villages in early modern England were not insular communities from which most people rarely moved. On the contrary, it is now clear that it was more common for men, women and children in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to move from their birthplaces than it was to stay at home. That this was so was one of the early discoveries of those working for the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (see pp. 6–7), who, when they began to exploit parish registers as sources for population history, were frequently disconcerted to discover that a series of baptismal, marriage and burial registers for one parish did not produce the expected picture of long-established village family dynasties. Instead, individuals 'disappeared' from the registers; a symptom of large-scale internal migration,

conclusive evidence for which has been provided by historians working on many sources. The most useful of these is an unlikely one: the depositions made by witnesses in ecclesiastical courts, who had to make a brief biographical statement before they gave their sworn testimony. These show that most people moved only short distances. Dr Cornwall's study of 206 witnesses before two church courts in Sussex between 1580 and 1640 concludes that over 75 per cent of them no longer lived in their birth-places; most had moved only once and over short distances of up to twenty miles. These witnesses, however, were 'gentry, farmers and respectable tradesmen' from the middling ranks of English society.² Long-distance migration was more common among people at the upper and lower ends of the social spectrum. Wealthy landowners, merchants and professional people and their families, as will be seen (pp. 27–8), habitually travelled to London to take advantage of the many attractions of the capital; while landless labourers, vagrants and unemployed young people travelled long distances in search of work. Between 1580 and 1640 poor migrants from all parts of Britain poured into three Kentish towns. Some travelled even further afield, emigrating to Ireland or boarding ships at ports like Bristol, taking the hazardous gamble of sailing to the newly established colonies in north America to become indentured servants.³

Classifying migrants into two broad categories ('betterment' and 'subsistence' migrants) gives a pattern to what otherwise seems a confusing maelstrom of people continually on the move. 'Subsistence migrants' were those who moved because they were forced to do so as a result of the unstable contemporary agrarian economy, which it has been seen failed to produce adequate employment for people and forced many to tramp the roads looking for work at hiring fairs in arable, 'fielden' areas, or to flock to pastoral, 'forest' regions like the Northamptonshire Forest, the Sussex Weald or the moorland areas of Cumbria. Many subsistence migrants also went to towns, attracted by urban poor relief schemes. 'Betterment' migrants, on the other hand, were those who moved from choice in order to improve their economic and social positions: for example, to serve as apprentices in a neighbouring town or in London, or to get married. As might be expected, subsistence migrants were drawn from the poorer end of society and travelled long distances, while betterment migrants came from more well-to-do backgrounds and travelled short distances.

There was another group of migrants in early modern England that does not fit easily into either of these categories. Ann Kussmaul has estimated that about two-thirds of unmarried adolescents and young adults aged between 15 and 24 worked as domestic or farm servants, commonly on annual contracts, living in the houses of their employers.⁴ In this, as in other respects, the family life of Ralph Josselin, the

² J. Cornwall, 'Evidence of population mobility in the seventeenth century', *B.I.H.R.*, XL (1967), pp. 143–52.

³ P. Clark, 'The migrant in Kentish towns, 1580–1640' in P. Clark and P. Slack, eds., *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500–1700* (1972), pp. 117–63; P. Clark and D. Souden, eds., *Migration and Society in Early Modern England* (1987).

⁴ A. Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (1981).

mid-seventeenth-century vicar of Earl's Colne in Essex, is typical; all his children left home in their early teens.⁵

The 'European marriage pattern'

That so many young people lived away from their parental homes until they married in their mid or late twenties is consistent with other features of early modern English society which are accepted by most (if not all) social historians: the typicality of the nuclear family, small households and what has become known as the 'European marriage pattern'. The main feature of this 'pattern' is that couples did not marry until they had the resources to establish independent households, causing many people to marry late in life or remain unmarried. Additional features of the 'pattern' are that brides were frequently pregnant when the marriage was entered in the parochial marriage register, and illegitimacy rates were very low.

Not all families in early Stuart England, of course, fit into this 'marriage pattern'. Extended families, large households and arranged child marriages were common among the landed elite. Moreover, as will be seen, illegitimacy rates did occasionally rise to high levels. But these are exceptions to the general rule. There is little reason to doubt the Cambridge Group's estimate that the mean household size in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England was between four and five, that the mean male age at first marriage was between 27.1 and 28.1 years of age, and that the mean female age at first marriage fluctuated between 24.8 and 27 years of age. Not only did most English men and women marry fairly late in life, but a large percentage never married at all. Probably typical is Ealing, where in 1599 one-quarter of the women aged over forty were unmarried.⁶ The age at which people married fluctuated in early modern England and, as has been seen, this was the main factor determining rises or falls in national population levels. But people always married much later in this period than they do in modern Britain, which is perhaps a reflection of the fact that in the early seventeenth century population growth outstripped resources and that many people had a pessimistic assessment of their economic future.

One further feature of the 'marriage pattern' is even more difficult to account for. Given the fact that many people married late and spent long periods away from parental supervision, it is slightly surprising that illegitimacy rates only once exceeded 3 per cent in the seventeenth century. This may be a distortedly low figure produced by under-assessment of infanticide and abortion. But a more likely explanation is the power of church courts and communal sanctions. Cohabitation seems to have been common, however, among couples who were already betrothed. Between 1600 and 1649 in twelve widely scattered parishes, 228 per 1,000 babies were born within eight months of marriages being recorded in parish registers. One explanation for this high incidence

⁵ A. Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin* (1970).

⁶ Smith, 'Population and its geography, 1500–1700' in Dodgson and Butlin, eds., *Historical Geography of England and Wales*.

of bridal pregnancy may be that before the mid-eighteenth century marriage did not begin with a church wedding service; marriage was a process that began from the moment of the betrothal and was concluded by a ceremony in church. As a result, conception often took place before the marriage process ended. This perhaps accounts for the relatively few times when illegitimacy rates rose sharply, as they did in the first years of the Stuart age when circumstances occurred that unexpectedly prevented the marriage process from being completed. It may not be coincidental that the high illegitimacy rates of the late 1590s to early 1600s followed a succession of bad harvests between 1594 and 1597. Of the 82 illegitimate births that are recorded in the Essex village of Terling between 1570 and 1699, for example, 27 took place between 1597 and 1607.⁷

Relationships within families

How were social relationships in early modern England affected by a situation in which most people moved about frequently, married relatively late in their lives and lived in small nuclear families? Given the bewildering diversity of experiences even among a population as small as 4–5 million, answering that question in a general way is extremely difficult. However, two generalizations about relationships in this period have received widespread support in recent years. The first is that relationships within nuclear families, between husbands and wives and parents and children, were no less affectionate or warm than those between members of modern nuclear families. That is not the view expressed in one of the most readable books on the social history of early modern England: Lawrence Stone's *Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (1977). At first sight Stone's thesis is persuasive. Since most people married relatively late in life and the duration of marriages was short and remarriages very common, he argues that marriages were unlikely to have been characterized by deep bonds of love and affection, especially since many were arranged by parents and were made for hard-headed practical reasons rather than for love. Moreover, since infant mortality was high, it follows, he suggests, that parents were inhibited from making an 'emotional involvement' in their children. What is more, some primary source material seems to confirm this picture of cold, unloving relationships between husbands and wives and parents and children: married couples often addressed each other in very formal ways in their correspondence ('dearest madam', 'honoured sir', etc.) and parents often gave the name of a recently deceased infant to a new-born child. Stone's argument is that this situation changed only slowly during the course of the seventeenth century as family life became infused with 'affective individualism', with love and affection, as the English family passed through phases that he calls 'the open lineage family' (1450–1630), 'the restricted patriarchal nuclear family' (1550–1700) and 'the closed domesticated nuclear family' (1640–1800).

⁷ P. Laslett, et al., eds., *Bastardy and Its Comparative Context* (1980); P. E. H. Hair, 'Bridal pregnancy in rural England in earlier centuries', *Population Studies*, XX (1966); K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling 1525–1700* (1979), pp. 127–32.

This is a view, however, which (outside the ranks of the landed elite) has been shown to be at odds with historical reality.⁸ This is not to suggest that family tensions and even wife beating, double standards regarding extra-marital sex and child abuse were not as prevalent as they are nowadays. But in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, young people were normally given much freedom in choosing their marriage partners; a situation which is not surprising given the fact that many young adolescents spent much of their time working away from the close day-to-day supervision of parents. Diary evidence shows many instances of close attachments between husbands and wives and also of close affectionate bonds between parents and children. In August 1659 the death of his eight-year-old son obviously brought deep emotional anguish to the family of Adam Martindale, who recorded in his diary that

I was gone to Chester when he died, my businesse being urgent, and he in a hopefull way of recovery when I set out, (at least as we thought), and being there I had an irresistible impression upon my spirit that I must needs go home that night, (though I could not ghesse why, for I did not in the least suspect his death) so that I left some considerable businesse undone which I could have brought to an head the next day, and went home that evening, where I found a sad distracted family that needed much consolation and assistance from me; and I do verily believe that strong impression was from some angell that God employed to help me in that worke.⁹

In the present state of knowledge, Stone's hypothesis of a broad change from cold, impersonal relationships within the nuclear family to the later growth of 'affective individualism' seems exciting but without much foundation, while the alternative view of a continuous thread of affectionate relationships within the early modern family is duller, supported by much more evidence, and probably nearer the historical 'truth'.

The importance of neighbourliness

The second generalization about relationships between individuals in early modern England is that bonds with kin outside the nuclear family were not as significant as was once thought. This is, like most historical generalizations, one that needs some qualification. Among propertied groups such as large landowners and merchants, relations within a wide circle of 'cousins' were important when matters like the ownership and descent of property or the pursuit of credit were uppermost. But even among these groups, kinship was not the only – or prime – consideration in their calculations. In constructing their patronage networks, landed gentlemen did not rely solely or mainly on recruiting blood relations; and in getting business or credit, seventeenth-century merchants and manufacturers often tapped a network of co-religionists rather than of kin. Lower down the social scale, relations with kin beyond the nuclear family were of even less significance, as might be expected of a society in which a highly geographically

⁸ R. Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450–1700* (1984) and 'Alternatives: the early modern English family', *Early Modern History*, I (1992), pp. 30–1.

⁹ Quoted in B. Coward, *Social Change and Continuity in Early Modern England, 1550–1750* (1988), pp. 109–10.

mobile population was a solvent of close and extensive kinship networks. In times of trouble, the mass of people in Stuart England seem to have looked not to their kin for aid, but to their neighbours and the local community.¹⁰

Despite the fact that people travelled with some frequency in this period, neighbourhood ties were a strong feature of the popular culture of Stuart England, and were reinforced by many aspects of day-to-day life in English towns and villages. The parish, for example, was the basic unit of local government, which administered both the statutory poor law and private philanthropic schemes. Popular participation in local government through office holding was extensive (see p. 29).

It is now clear that local customs and festivities also had a crucial role in strengthening local ties in early modern England. Sometimes they were used in a menacing manner to help enforce orthodox values, as in the case of ‘charivari’ or ‘rough music’. These were demonstrations of communal disapproval of those thought to be adulterers or cuckolds or other ‘deviants’, in which the ‘culprits’ were publicly humiliated and subjected to mocking laughter. More frequently, local festivities were used in less menacing ways to strengthen local social bonds, as in the case of harvest suppers and sheep-shearing feasts or the annual Rogation week perambulations of the parish boundaries.¹¹

The strength of these neighbourhood ties, however, should not obscure the fact that for many people in early Stuart England a sense of belonging to one’s own local community did not preclude allegiance to other ‘communities’, whether these were the county or the country or loyalty to one’s patron. As will be seen in Chapter 3 (pp. 67–72), allegiance to local communities did not prevent early Stuart men and women participating in a wider national political and religious culture.

Towns and townspeople

Another area of social history in which rapid progress was made in the 1970s and 1980s is the history of towns and those who lived in them. With the exception of the history of London, the subject hardly seems to warrant the attention it has received from urban historians.¹² The growth of towns was not a marked feature of the economy of the Stuart age until the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

¹⁰ K. Wrightson, ‘Kinship in an English village’ in R. M. Smith, ed., *Land, Kinship and Life Cycle* (1984). For a slightly different emphasis, see D. Cressy, ‘Kinship and kin interaction in early modern England’, *P. & P.*, CXIII (1986) and M. Chaytor, ‘Household and kinship in Ryton’, *History Workshop*, no. 11 (1981).

¹¹ M. Ingram, ‘Ridings, rough music and the “reform of popular culture” in early modern England’, *P. & P.*, CV (1984); M. Ingram, ‘Ridings, rough music and mocking rhymes in early modern England’, in B. Reay, ed., *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (1985); B. Bushaway, *By Rite: Customs, Ceremony and Community 1700–1880* (1982).

¹² For good recent introductions to urban studies, see Jonathan Barry, ‘Introduction’ in Barry, ed., *The Tudor and Stuart Town: a reader in English urban history 1530–1688* (1990) and P. Corfield, ‘Urban development in England and Wales in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’ in A. H. John and D. C. Coleman, eds., *Trade, Government and Society* (1976), repr. in Barry, *Tudor and Stuart Town*. See also three Open University books: *Towns and Townspeople 1550–1780*; *The Fabric of the Traditional Community*; and *The Traditional Community under Stress* (1977).



4. A henpecked husband and his punishment: *Halfe a Dozen Good Wives: All for a Penny* (London, ?1635), in *The Roxburghe Ballads*, ed. W. Chappell and J. W. Ebsworth, 9 vols. (London and Hertford, 1869-99), i, p. 451.

Figure 2.1 A charivari. A husband is being chastised by some women for being a cuckold: that is, for not controlling his wife's extra-marital sexual activities. Often charivari involved more people and threatened more violence. Whatever the scale of the demonstrations, however, all charivari were one of the means by which communities attempted to impose moral codes of conduct.

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Without any doubt, however, the exception is very important. London grew at an exceptionally rapid rate in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and by 1650 its economic and social importance was greater than before or since. This has become more than ever apparent following the publication of important research on early modern London that plugged a gaping gap in historical scholarship.¹³ From 1550 to 1600 the population of the capital rose rapidly from 80,000 to 200,000: that is, at a much faster rate than the national population. In 1650 London's population had reached 400,000, by which time it was about twenty times bigger than the largest English provincial town and was the biggest city in western Europe (Constantinople in

¹³ A. L. Beier and R. Finlay, eds., *The Making of the Metropolis: London 1500-1700* (1986); J. P. Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: a London suburb in the seventeenth century* [Southwark] (1987); S. Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: structures of life in sixteenth-century London* (1989); I. W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: social relations in Elizabethan London* (1991); following the pioneering work of V. Pearl, 'Change and stability in seventeenth-century London', *London Journal*, V (1979) and 'Social policy in early modern London' in H. Lloyd-Jones, V. Pearl and B. Worden, eds., *History and Imagination: essays in honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper* (1981).



Figure 2.2 From ‘The Long View of London from Bankside’ produced by Wenceslaus Hollar in 1647. Hollar was a Protestant refugee from Bohemia who came to London in the late 1630s in the entourage of the earl of Arundel. In London and later in Antwerp he developed a profitable career selling high-class engravings. This one catered for those both in England and on the Continent who were interested in the emergence of London as the largest city in western Europe.

Source: © Mary Evans Picture Library.

eastern Europe was bigger); it had just overhauled its nearest rival, Paris, and had left other European cities far behind in size: Naples (250,000–300,000), Amsterdam (150,000), Palermo, Venice, Rome, Lisbon (100–125,000).¹⁴

London had spilled beyond the boundaries of the medieval City so that the familiar pattern was already established of poorer housing to the east and on the south bank of the Thames in Southwark, and superior property development to the west, at first following the river frontage along the Strand towards Westminster, and later expanding northwards to Holborn and westwards to St Martin’s Lane. John Evelyn’s explanation for this is an attractive one. The better classes built or bought houses to the west of the city ‘because the Windes blowing near $\frac{3}{4}$ of the year from the west, the dwellings of the West End are so much free from the fumes, steams & stinks of the whole Easterly Pyle; which when Sea Coal is burnt is a great matter’.¹⁵ But, while this illustrates

¹⁴ I have followed Dr Harding’s revisions of some recent estimates of the population of London: V. Harding, ‘The population of London 1550–1700: a review of the published evidence’, *London Journal*, XV (1990); E. A. Wrigley, ‘A simple model of London’s importance in changing England’s society and economy 1650–1750’, *P. & P.*, XXXVII (1967).

¹⁵ Quoted in C. Wilson, *England’s Apprenticeship 1603–1763* (1965), p. 47.

London's great dependence on coal from the mines of the north-east, a more accurate – if more prosaic – explanation is probably that the royal court and the law courts attracted the superior houses and shops to the Westminster area. This embryonic West End produced some examples of enlightened urban development, especially the Covent Garden piazza erected on his Long Acre site by the fourth earl of Bedford and the architects Inigo Jones and Isaac de Caux. Most landowners, however, were more interested in the profits of property speculation than the aesthetics of town planning. Most of them gave long 31-year leases of their London estates to builders, allowing them to develop them as they wished.¹⁶ The result was that many tenements were built in the West End that were as squalid as – and in some cases perhaps even more so than – those in the East End.

Why did London grow at such a rapid rate in the century and a half before 1650? London's growth was sustained by continuous, massive immigration from the provinces (and to a much lesser extent from abroad) and not by a superior birth rate; on the contrary, the death rate in London far outstripped the birth rate because of the above-average incidence of plague and other diseases in the insanitary conditions of the capital. Part of the explanation for London's growth therefore lies in the reasons why people came to live there. As at all times, these, of course, varied. Poor 'subsistence migrants' came to the capital because of its superior official system for the relief of poverty, its private poor relief schemes, and the greater opportunities for survival in London by means of part-time employment, begging and crime. The better-off 'betterment migrants' of the Dick Whittington type came to London to serve as apprentices of London merchants and craftsmen, while London's mercantile community expanded because of the capital's role as the centre of England's overseas and internal trade. Aliens sought refuge in London from political and religious persecution in their own countries. Nor was it economic motivation that drew those from higher up the social scale. Typically, the misogynic James I thought that 'one of the greatest causes of all Gentlemens desire, that have no calling or errand, to dwell in London, is apparently the pride of women: For if they bee wives, then their fathers, must bring them up to London . . .' Landed gentlemen, though, probably did not need nagging into visiting London or into buying a house there. London was the residence of the royal court, where attendance by the politically or socially ambitious was a necessity. The main law courts, to the grievance not only of the radicals of the mid-seventeenth century, were all in London, drawing the members of the litigious propertied classes to them. In the capital, too, there were fine schools: Westminster and St Paul's, and the Inns of Court, the 'third university' of the English landed gentry in this period. In addition, London developed unrivalled social facilities for all tastes, shops, entertainment parks like Paris Gardens in Southwark, and the theatre. Professor F.J. Fisher has argued that to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries can be traced the

¹⁶ Stone, *Crisis*; L. Stone, *Family and Fortune: studies in aristocratic fortunes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (1973), ch. 3.

origins of the London social ‘season’.¹⁷ Many people, then, came to London for different reasons, but all (with the possible exception of the numerically insignificant foreign immigrants) have one thing in common: they came to London because it was already a big city with developing facilities of all kinds. In other words, the major reason why London grew bigger at such a rapid rate in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is that it was already big by 1500.

To many contemporaries this was something to condemn. ‘It is the fashion of Italy’, wrote James I, ‘that all the Gentry dwell in the principal towns, and so the whole country is empty. Even so now in England all the country is gotten into London, so as with time England will only be London and the whole country be left waste . . .’ Later, in 1641, Sir Thomas Roe wrote dramatically that ‘it is no good state of a body to have a fat head, thin guts, and lean members’.¹⁸ It is not easy to judge how justified those fears were. Different conclusions can be drawn from the fact that London’s growth was sustained by immigration on a massive scale. Since London was a ‘demographic drain’, it can be argued that the provinces were thereby stripped of a valuable supply of labour as their able-bodied men and women moved away to London. On the other hand, one could argue that London fulfilled a valuable function in relieving many provincial economies of the excessive pressure put on them by an expanding population. Is it not possible that the growth of London could have had both a beneficial *and* a parasitical effect on the country’s economy, depending on different circumstances? Professor Fisher has shown how the market for food and the development of industries in London stimulated agricultural improvements, regional specialization and commercialization, and internal trade in grain, cattle, other agricultural products and coal in many provincial economies. In its role in the organization of English overseas trade and the provision of credit, London became an ‘engine of growth’.¹⁹ Significantly, for example, it was a group of London merchants who successfully established a colony in Virginia in 1607, not their West Country-based rivals who did not have the London money market behind them. But in different circumstances London clearly inhibited economic growth. The capital’s dominance of English overseas trade was not the sole reason for the decay of provincial ports, like Southampton, but it undoubtedly contributed to it. The London food market, too, was a powerful competitor for sparse food resources in some areas, so depressing the standard of living there. For example, London brewers successfully outbid local rivals for the supply of barley in some Home Counties and diverted precious grain supplies to the capital. Surely London had a multiple impact on the economy of the provinces.

¹⁷ F. J. Fisher, ‘The development of London as a centre of conspicuous consumption in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’, *T.R.H.S.*, XXX (1948), pp. 37–50, repr. in E. Carus-Wilson, ed., *Essays in Economic History*, II (1962), pp. 197–207 and in N. Harte and P. Corfield, *London and the English Economy* (1990).

¹⁸ Thirsk and Cooper, p. 45.

¹⁹ F. J. Fisher, ‘The development of the London food market’, *Econ. H.R.*, 1st ser., V (1935), repr. in Carus-Wilson, ed., *Essays*, I, pp. 135–51 and in Harte and Corfield, eds., *London*; Fisher, ‘London as an “engine of economic growth”’, in J. S. Bromley and E. H. Kossman, eds., *Britain and the Netherlands*, IV (1971), pp. 3–16.

Work in the 1970s and 1980s also clarified, if it did not solve conclusively, another historical problem about the rapid growth of London, where the growing inequality in the distribution of wealth and social polarization that was taking place in rural areas was proceeding even more rapidly. On the face of it, this situation ought to have been a recipe for the kind of violent social conflict that erupted in some continental cities in early modern Europe: for example, the risings of the *Comuneros* and the *Germanías* that caused massive devastation in towns in Castile and Valencia in 1520–1.²⁰ Yet, although towns in early modern England were no freer from riots than are some nowadays, popular disturbances never escalated into attacks on the existing social and political order. They focused instead on specific targets; usually the scarcity and high price of grain, as in the riots in Maldon, Essex, in 1629.²¹ In the same year, 500 rioters attacked and killed Dr John Lambe on the streets of London for his association with the unpopular duke of Buckingham.²² Urban riots in seventeenth-century England, like popular disturbances elsewhere, were small scale and rioters were motivated by a desire to protect existing rights, not to establish new ones (see p. 37). Recent work on early modern London has, in general, supported Valerie Pearl's optimistic view that, despite the massive influx of poor migrants in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, life in the capital was remarkably stable. It may be that this view is one seen through the distorting mirror of City of London sources and does not take enough account of what was happening in more volatile, teeming, extra-mural suburbs like Islington, Bermondsey and Lambeth.²³ But, even during the severe economic crisis years of the 1590s and early 1620s, London (both outside and inside the City walls) remained stable.

One explanation for this is that the development of 'residential zoning' (rich and poor living in separate parts of the city) had not proceeded very far or quickly in London by the mid-seventeenth century.²⁴ Another is that the multiplicity of local government offices made for a high incidence of participation in urban affairs by Londoners, especially men. In the London parish of Cornhill in the 1640s, one in every sixteen inhabitants was an office-holder and elsewhere the ratio was even higher. By this time, too, half the adult males of the London suburb of Southwark were freemen of the City.²⁵ The result may have been to bridge the gap between the rulers and the ruled of

²⁰ J. H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain 1469–1716* (1963), pp. 141–59.

²¹ J. Walter, 'Grain riots and popular attitudes to the law: Maldon and the grain riots of 1629' in J. Brewer and J. Styles, eds., *An Ungovernable People* (1980).

²² K. Lindley, 'Riot prevention and control in early Stuart London', *T.R.H.S.*, 5th ser., XXXIII (1983), pp. 114–15.

²³ See the works by Pearl, Boulton, Rappaport and Archer cited in note 13 above, and the review article by K. Lindley, 'The maintenance of stability in early modern London', *H.J.*, XXXIV (1991), pp. 985–990.

²⁴ M. Power, 'East and West in early modern London' in E. W. Ives, et al., eds., *Wealth and Power in Tudor London* (1978).

²⁵ Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society* [Southwark], pp. 151–4.

early Stuart London. This tendency was strengthened by the growing sensitivity of the authorities in the capital to the problems of poverty, a phenomenon evidenced by the development of a social policy designed to alleviate them. As will be seen (p. 32), provincial town authorities, too, attacked the poverty problem with some gusto, especially in places like Salisbury (in Wiltshire) and Dorchester (in Dorset) where urban governors' concern for order was reinforced by a godly zeal for reformation.²⁶ In crisis years of bad harvests, trade depression or plague tensions erupted, as they did in Dorchester in October 1630 when a crowd of women seized a sack of corn in the market and one of them slit it open to prevent the merchant from selling it elsewhere.²⁷ But generally, urban poor relief schemes in early Stuart England seem to have successfully alleviated the worst effects of poverty and so avoided severe social instability in provincial towns and London alike.

It is easier to make clear generalizations about the history of early modern provincial towns than it is about the history of London. Before 1650 provincial towns were unimportant. Even at the end of the seventeenth century only about 5 per cent of the population lived in towns of over 5,000 inhabitants outside London. Before 1650 there were only a handful of provincial towns in this category, including Norwich and Bristol, which had between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants, and Exeter, Plymouth, Worcester, Coventry, Ipswich, Colchester, York and Newcastle upon Tyne with between 5,000 and 10,000. Did the populations and importance of this group of provincial towns with over 5,000 inhabitants increase in the period before 1650? Unfortunately, urban historians have not yet produced a clear-cut answer to that question. Rather they have revealed a vast variety of urban fortunes. Some towns, like Southampton and other provincial ports, were adversely affected as London gobbled up their trade; though clearly not all ports suffered, as those like Bristol and Exeter developed independent trades to southern Europe, and in the case of Newcastle London's demand for coal was the major factor in the rapid rise of that port in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some towns, like Coventry, Leicester, Beverley and Lincoln, suffered in the general movement of industry, especially cloth manufacturing, to the countryside; others, however, emerged in the same period as manufacturing and marketing centres of the cloth industry, like Norwich, Exeter and Worcester; and others, like Canterbury and Sandwich, developed crafts brought by foreign immigrants. The economies of some towns, especially those in the hotly contested Severn Valley, like Gloucester and Bristol, were dislocated during the Civil War in the early 1640s;²⁸ while others, like those in the south-eastern counties which saw less fighting, were able to carry on their trade and industry with less (if not without) disruption. Some expanded as

²⁶ P. Slack, 'Poverty and politics in Salisbury 1597–1666' in Clark and Slack, eds., *Crisis and Order*, D. Underdown, *Fire from Heaven: the life of an English town in the seventeenth century* [Dorchester] (1992), ch. 3.

²⁷ Underdown, *Fire from Heaven*, p. 87.

²⁸ Ian Roy, 'England turned Germany? The aftermath of the civil war in its European context', *T.R.H.S.*, XXVIII (1978), pp. 127–44.

administrative centres, like York which was until 1641 the seat of the council of the north, or as the meeting places of quarter sessions and assizes; these 'provincial capitals' with their professional services, social and shopping facilities developed as mini-Londons, expanding, of course, in this respect at the expense of neighbouring towns.

The varying ways in which provincial towns developed before 1650 ought to warn against attempts to maintain generalizations about provincial towns being in a state of 'crisis' in this period, and against seeing the period from 1500 to 1700 compared with the Middle Ages as 'a period of substantial and sustained urbanization'.²⁹ This should not, though, serve to obscure the facts that, beside the growth of London, the development of provincial towns before 1650 was snail-like, and that, seen in the context of the national economy, their significance was slight. English agriculture had not yet become efficient enough to feed a large urban population. The manufacturing sector of the English economy was not diversified enough to enable many towns to develop as industrial centres. Overseas trade had not yet broken sufficiently away from its London–Europe axis to promote the development of the trade of provincial ports. The English economy needed to expand faster and diversify considerably more before towns other than London could grow. This, as will be seen, like a lot of other economic and social developments, was a phenomenon whose beginnings can be traced more clearly to the later seventeenth century than to the period before 1650.

Social mobility: affluence and poverty

Finally, some historians by the 1980s had reached some widely accepted conclusions about the standards of living of people in this period. Disagreements there were along the way, some of them very major ones,³⁰ but no one now challenges the view that inflationary and demographic pressures made the period one of great social mobility. Sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England in no way accorded with the stable, ordered society that many contemporaries would have liked it to be. The prosperous people of the period left monuments to their rising standards of living which still survive: 'prodigy houses', the stately homes of rentier landlords; manor houses built by lesser gentry with profits made from rents and farming; substantial farmhouses of thriving yeomen farmers; funeral monuments and educational endowments of successful merchants and clothiers; and, though less obvious, tucked away as they are in county record offices, probate inventories of well-to-do husbandsmen, labourers and craftsmen. William Harrison, writing in the later sixteenth century, noted improved standards in housing and living conditions:

²⁹ P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition 1500–1700* (1976). On this debate see Barry, *Tudor and Stuart Town*, pp. 6–7 and A. Dyer, 'Growth and decay in English towns 1500–1700' in *Urban History Yearbook* (1979).

³⁰ See for example 'the storm over the gentry' and its aftermath, which is detailed, along with much information about the changing standards of living of social groups in this period, in earlier editions of this book, but which have been deleted from this edition to make way for the new research and new emphases of social historians since the early 1990s.

There are old men yet dwelling in the village where I remaine, which have noted three things to be marvellouslie altered in England within their said remembrance . . . One is, the multitude of chimnies lately erected . . . The second is the great (although not generall) amendment of lodging . . . The third they tell of, is the exchange of Vessell, as of treene platters into pewter, and wooden spoones into silver or tin.³¹

Yet Harrison also observed that these improvements were not to be seen ‘further off from our southern parts’. The geographical inequality in the distribution of wealth is best illustrated by county subsidy assessments. An analysis of those from 1515 produced the unsurprising conclusion that all but four of the counties with wealth higher than the average lay south of a line drawn from the Severn to the Wash. More startling is the scale of the disparity in the distribution of wealth; in 1515 Lancashire was assessed at £3 8s per 1,000 acres, while Middlesex’s assessment was fixed at £238 1s per 1,000 acres.³² Though the 1515 situation changed during the next century – for example, the West Country and East Anglia declined, reflecting the fortunes of their textile industries – it is likely that the major change was that the rich southern counties pulled even further ahead of the poor north, especially as London grew rapidly. The unequal distribution of wealth among social groups is as striking as the regional differences. Those who became poorer in this period, improvident landlords, small farmers hit by bad harvests or rising rents, unemployed labourers and vagrants, and the urban poor, have left as many enduring (if not as obvious) signs of their presence as their more fortunate contemporaries: almshouses, workhouses, poor law statutes and contemporary comments. Robert Gray in 1609 got right to the heart of the cause of poverty in this period. ‘Our multitudes’, he wrote, ‘like too much blood in the body, do infect our country with plague and poverty. Our land hath brought forth but it hath not milk sufficient in the breast thereof to nourish all those children which it hath brought forth.’³³

Not the least important indication of the size of the poverty problem in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is the combined effort of officialdom and private individuals to deal with it. Since poverty was more extensive in towns, it was naturally urban authorities which led the way in doing so. During the sixteenth century London and the provincial capitals, which were the main goals of streams of poor migrants, began to make censuses of the poor and build houses of correction in which to provide workhouses and outdoor relief for the young, old and sick. In 1547 London was the first authority to authorize a compulsory poor rate to finance these schemes, and the capital’s lead was soon followed by Norwich, Ipswich, Colchester, York and other towns. In most towns expenditure on poor relief rose; the tiny community of Tiverton in Devon more than doubled its financial provision for the poor

³¹ E. Power and R. H. Tawney, eds., *Tudor Economic Documents* (3 vols., 1924), III, pp. 69–70.

³² R. S. Schofield, ‘The geographical distribution of wealth in England 1334–1649’, *Econ. H.R.*, 2nd ser., XVIII, 1965, pp. 505–7.

³³ Thirsk and Cooper, p. 758. See also *English Historical Documents 1603–60*, document no. 17.

between 1612 (£120) and 1656 (£300).³⁴ At times of severe economic crisis, especially during the early 1620s when trade dislocation combined with plague and bad harvests, the threat of being overwhelmed by hordes of desperate, poor people encouraged some towns to formulate imaginative schemes. The best known is the establishment of a municipally run brewery at Salisbury in the early 1620s, the profits of which were intended to be used to finance poor relief in the town. In addition, no doubt to prevent the poor squandering their dole on municipal ale, the Salisbury authorities issued poor relief tokens which could only be exchanged for goods at a town storehouse.³⁵

In all this English towns responded to the poverty problem in ways similar to those of many continental towns. Where England differed is that the State adopted some of the urban poverty relief schemes to establish a national poor relief system. The first major step was an Act of 1572 which established a compulsory poor rate in every parish. The economic crisis of the 1590s prompted parliament in 1598 to produce two statutes which drew on urban experience in coping with the poor, and which were to be the basis of the national poor relief system in England until 1834. The two statutes reflected the way contemporary opinion divided the poor. The first dealt with the able-bodied poor, who were considered to be poor because they were idle and who were therefore undeserving of poor relief; all such 'sturdy beggars' over the age of seven were to be whipped and returned to the parish of their birth if it was known, or, if it was not, to the place where they had last lived for at least a year. A statute of 1610 made further provision for 'sturdy beggars' by ordering each parish to establish a house of correction to employ and punish them. The second Act of 1598 was concerned with the impotent poor, who were poor because of no fault of their own; these old or sick deserving poor were either to be given outdoor relief in the form of pensions, food or clothing, or they were to be put into workhouses. Poor children where possible were to be found apprenticeships. These Acts and a codifying statute of 1601 placed the responsibility for organizing poor relief on the parishes, who were to appoint overseers to administer poor relief and to collect the compulsory poor rate.

Legislation reflects intention not achievement. How successfully did the parish authorities in the early seventeenth century administer the national system of poor relief? Unfortunately the establishment and operation of it was too piecemeal to allow a clear answer. Not all parishes established a compulsory poor rate after the passage of the 1572, 1598 and 1601 legislation, and those that did administered it with varying degrees of efficiency and zeal. Often more energy seems to have been directed by parish authorities into the punishment and resettlement outside their parish of the vagrant poor and into outdoor relief for the deserving poor, rather than into the more complicated business of establishing workhouses and employment schemes. Few parishes in the West and North Riding of Yorkshire had stocks of material on which the poor

³⁴ A. L. Beier, *The Problem of the Poor in Tudor and Early Stuart England* (1983); P. Slack, *Poverty in Tudor and Stuart England* (1987); Clark and Slack, eds., *Crisis and Order*, p. 20.

³⁵ Slack, 'Poverty and politics in Salisbury' in Clark and Slack, eds., *Crisis and Order*, pp. 164–203.

could work until the reign of Charles I.³⁶ The control of alehouses was also a common concern of both county and parish authorities, partly on moral grounds and because alehouses were seen to be the breeding ground of crime and disorder, but also because alehouses were considered to be a major cause of poverty, as well as providing shelter for wandering beggars. The predominant emphasis of poor law administration in individual parishes was on restricting the numbers of paupers within their jurisdiction and therefore in keeping down the escalating cost of poor relief. Concern at the latter undoubtedly grew; parishioners grumbled at too high assessments, and quarter sessions had to sort out numerous rating disputes. Though there are few instances of blatant inefficiency and corruption in early seventeenth-century poor law administration, this is no doubt a reflection of the available primary sources rather than of reality; overseers' and churchwardens' accounts are hardly likely to record instances of maladministration and corruption. It would be dangerous to argue that none occurred. But perhaps one can be too sceptical. At times of severe distress most poor law authorities acted zealously, although once the immediate crisis was over the authorities probably relaxed their administrative vigilance. This is probably true of the administration of poor relief in the 1630s through the Books of Orders, as will be seen later. With varying results the poor relief system was established in most English parishes in the early seventeenth century, especially from the 1620s onwards. Anthony Fletcher concludes, after a survey of the administration of poor relief in many counties, that 'the serious dearth of 1647 to 1650 was probably the decisive factor in the institutionalization of the poor law where it had not yet occurred'.³⁷

It is a mistake to assume from the patchy quality of poor law administration in the early seventeenth century that the major role in the relief of poverty was filled not by the official poor law, but by the philanthropy of individuals. This is Professor W. K. Jordan's contention, which he supports by massive research into all charitable endowments and bequests made between 1480 and 1660.³⁸ Landed gentlemen considered it their duty to look after the poor by distributing largesse. 'Twice a week', wrote Sir Hugh Cholmondley, a Yorkshire landowner, looking back to the 1630s, 'a certain number of people, widows and indigent persons were served at my gates with bread and good pottage made of beef, which I mention that those which succeed may follow the example'.³⁹ Even more important was the money poured into poor relief by merchants. Jordan has shown that private charity was important before 1660; he has not, however, proved that it was growing in value or that it was more important than official charity. Indeed, when the fall in the value of money in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is taken into account (which Jordan does not do), the *real* value

³⁶ G. C. F. Forster, 'The English local community and local government 1603–25', in A. G. R. Smith, ed., *The Reign of James VI and I* (1973), p. 203.

³⁷ A. Fletcher, *Reform in the Provinces: the government of Stuart England* (1986), p. 187.

³⁸ W. K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England: a study of the changing pattern of English social aspirations 1480–1660* (1959). See W. G. Bittle and R. Todd Lane, 'Inflation and philanthropy in England: a reassessment of Jordan's data', *Econ. H.R.*, 2nd ser., XXIX (1976) and J. F. Hadwin, 'Deflating philanthropy', *ibid.*, XXX (1979).

³⁹ J. T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War* (1969), p. 114.

of private philanthropy did not grow at all. Moreover, the charities established by individuals were probably no more efficiently administered than those set up by the poor law authorities. Some municipal authorities found irresistible the temptation to dip into charitable funds and use the money for other purposes.

There seems no doubt that the poor law was more important than the erratic contribution of private charity in the relief of poverty in the early seventeenth century. Parochial poor relief was increasingly important, especially for individuals at particularly vulnerable times in their lives: for example, young orphans, widows and the aged. A study of Aldenham in Hertfordshire, where about one-third of the inhabitants during the seventeenth century relied on parochial poor relief at least once in their lives, concludes that 'the cycle of family life had the benefit in times of crisis of a system of support operated over a very wide range of needs by a local authority sensitive to the circumstances of those requiring it'.⁴⁰ The undoubted achievements of early Stuart welfare schemes, however, should not be exaggerated. They were at best palliatives, and had no success in significantly reducing the size of the pauper population. As Robert Gray recognized at the time, poverty was deep-rooted in the economic structure of early Stuart England, in which unemployment and underemployment were common. When such an economy was hit by a run of bad harvests, then the condition of life for many people could become very bad indeed. The harvest failures of the 1620s, 1630s and 1640s led Bowden to conclude that these decades 'witnessed extreme hardship in England, and were probably the most terrible years through which the country has ever passed'.⁴¹

From the 1990s onwards: social history with the politics put back

In what follows the work of social historians since the 1990s to the present day will be praised as path breaking and exciting. But often their attempts to explain what they are doing is so riven by jargon that it might leave readers with a sense of puzzlement. Readers who master the jargon will be well rewarded, however. Another difficulty with their work is that it is so multi-faceted that it is sometimes far from easy to see common threads running through it. However, some do stand out very clearly and are so important that they will appear many times in the narrative sections of this book.

The first is the wide extent of office holding and popular participation in politics in early modern England. In some respects this is not a new insight. Nearly forty years ago Derek Hirst estimated that 27–40 per cent of adult males in England and Wales had the vote: that is, about 300,000 people (or 7–10 per cent of the population) were enfranchised.

⁴⁰ T. Wales, 'Poverty, poor relief and the life cycle: some evidence from seventeenth-century Norfolk' and W. Newsom-Brown, 'The receipts of poor relief and family situations in Aldenham, Herts., 1630–90' in Smith, ed., *Land, Kinship and Life Cycle*.

⁴¹ P. Bowden, 'Agricultural prices', in J. Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1500–1640* (1967), p. 621.

For the later period Geoffrey Holmes estimated that by 1715 some 5 per cent of the population of England and Wales (about 20 per cent of adult males) had the vote.⁴² The electorate was enlarged as the county franchise, the forty shilling freehold, was greatly increased by inflation and the practice of treating some customary tenants as freeholders; many borough franchises were even wider, bringing a much larger number of the people into the 'political nation' than had once been thought. In 1987 Cynthia Herrup's book highlighted another aspect of the extent of political participation of ordinary people: the ways in which members of local communities took part in the apprehension and prosecution of criminals. Herrup writes that 'the legal system exemplifies the participatory nature of English government in the seventeenth century'.⁴³ As a result of more recent work by social historians, it is now possible to put all this into a wider context. As Mark Goldie writes, 'an astonishingly high proportion of early modern people held office'. By the end of the seventeenth century there were about 50,000 parish officers in England's and Wales's 9,700 parishes; this means that about one-twentieth of the adult male population were office-holders.⁴⁴ What is more, these offices were held by people from all social groups from minor gentry to brickmakers, blacksmiths and tanners, as in Stone in Herefordshire.⁴⁵ People sought office as a mark of their social position, but, if necessary, offices were forced on them by local rules that offices should rotate amongst families. Service on local juries was restricted to freeholders, but juries sat frequently at assizes and quarter sessions, hearing local complaints or messages from the crown relayed by the assize judges. Stephen Roberts makes an important point when he writes 'of all the institutions of local representation, the sessions grand jury was the closest thing to a mouthpiece of the yeomanry of the country. It was nearly a parliament of the middling sort'.⁴⁶

One important consequence of all this is that many more people than ever before not only became directly involved in the political process as office-holders, but also were drawn into debates about current political and religious issues by reading and talking about them. This fuelled what has been called the growth of 'the public sphere', dealt with on p. 78 and in many other places in the narrative sections of this book.

A second conclusion, which follows from the first, is that political power was often not wielded by superiors over inferiors without any constraints. Instead its use was negotiated between superiors and inferiors. In other words very often the 'inferior' had the ability to use his or her power

⁴² These paragraphs rely on the mercifully jargon-free analysis of M. Goldie in 'The unacknowledged republic: officeholding in early modern England' in T. Harris, ed., *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500–1850* (2010). D. Hirst, *The Representative of the People? Voters and voting in England under the early Stuarts* (1975). G. Holmes, *The Electorate and the National Will in the First Age of Party* (1976).

⁴³ C. Herrup, *The Common Peace, Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth-Century England* (1987). Quotation from her 'Law and morality in seventeenth-century England' *P. & P.*, 106, 1985, pp. 102–23.

⁴⁴ Goldie, 'Unacknowledged republic' p. 161.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴⁶ S. K. Roberts, 'Juries and the middling sort: recruitment and performance at Devon quarter sessions, 1649–1670', in J. S. Cockburn and T. A. Green, eds., *Twelve Good Men and True: the criminal trial jury in England, 1300–1800* (1988), quoted in Goldie, 'Unacknowledged republic', p. 167.

to put restraints on the apparently all-powerful 'superior'.⁴⁷ This can be demonstrated by two examples of the negotiation of power in early modern England: the role of women and the functions of riots.

According to contemporary law and attitudes reflected in conduct books designed to guide people on how to behave, there can have been no more disadvantaged people in early modern England than women. The law gave married women no legal rights; they were seen as the property of their husbands. Conduct books taught that in all respects, intellectually, morally and physically, they were 'the weaker vessels' and that they should serve obediently their male superior whether that should be a father, husband or master. One of the achievements of recent historians is to show how women managed to negotiate a more powerful position for themselves than contemporary official opinion gave them.⁴⁸

They did this by adopting many strategies, like exploiting their position as managers of households (and even of estates in the case of some elite women) or as contributors to the family economy by the by-employments they took on, spinning, weaving and so on, to become partners of their husbands and not their servants, taking a full part in decisions made within families. They also used the female networks (which Capp describes using a contemporary term, 'gossips') they had made outside the home, on the streets and in church, to support them in their complaints against violent men and adulterous husbands, often by shaming their victims publicly and informally, not through the courts. Some women negotiated even more power for themselves, as moneylenders, leaders of riots and disorders, witnesses in court proceedings, and occasionally holders of parish offices.⁴⁹

Largely women negotiated more powerful positions for themselves by informal, non-violent strategies. This clearly cannot be said of those who used riots to put pressure on their governors. Although rebellions against the existing social and political order were largely absent from England before 1640 (unlike contemporary France), riots protesting against the rising price of food, enclosures, fen drainage and forest laws were very common. Using E. P. Thompson's seminal article,⁵⁰ which showed the existence of a contemporary view of a 'moral economy' that advocated a 'just' price

⁴⁷ The best introduction to this aspect is M. J. Braddick and J. Walter, 'Grids of power: order, hierarchy and subordination in early modern society' in their *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: order, hierarchy and subordination in Britain and Ireland* (2003).

⁴⁸ B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England* (2004). There is an excellent summary of some of the themes of this book in his 'Separate domains? Women and authority in early modern England' in P. Griffiths, A. Fox and S. Hindle, eds., *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (1996), on which I have relied a lot when writing this and the following two paragraphs.

⁴⁹ See my *Social Change and Continuity: England 1550–1750* (rev. edn., 1997), pp. 25–6; for more examples of women using power against their superiors, see A. Wood, '“Poore men woll speak one daye”: plebeian languages of deference and defiance in England, c.1520–1640', in Harris, *Politics of the Excluded*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ E. P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *P. & P.*, no. 50 (1971).

for food and the need for customary regulations forbidding merchants from taking grain away from stricken areas in times of bad harvests, more recent social historians have shown how rioters used this concept and the threat of violence to pressurize magistrates to put ‘the moral economy’ into practice. Riots were often the last resort of those affected by rising food prices. After the failure of petitions to magistrates, the rioters in effect used their positions to negotiate, often successfully, more power for themselves in the local community of the parish.

What is particularly exciting about this work on the negotiation of power is that it encourages us to envisage a new view of the early modern State: to see it not necessarily as an all-powerful centre ordering obedient, subservient local magistrates to perform the tasks given them. Instead, in the work of M. J. Braddick and S. Hindle, it is possible to see the early modern English State as ‘to a greater or lesser extent, participatory’.⁵¹ All local officers from magistrates (justices of the peace in counties and mayors and aldermen in towns) to parish officials (churchwardens, overseers of the poor) were in theory ‘inferior officers’, taking orders from the crown and privy council. But in reality their power, whether to execute those orders or not, was very great. This meant that the crown and privy council, like husbands in areas in which contemporary theory portrayed them as ‘superiors’, had to restrain their use of power in negotiation with their ‘inferiors’. One further consequence of this – the growth of the idea that early modern England was a ‘monarchical republic’ – will be dealt with later (see pp. 83–4).

Intellectual developments and popular beliefs

There are many aspects of the period before 1650 that seem to be progressive forerunners of future developments: educational opportunities increased; more people became literate, modern scientific principles were discovered; and Protestantism, a rational and anti-magical religion, was the prevalent ideology. However, it would be misleading to describe these developments in education, science and religion in the early seventeenth century as ‘modern’ or ‘progressive’. Even if more people were becoming literate, it does not necessarily follow that they read or were taught new, ‘modern’ ideas. Though the scientific discoveries of this period were important for the future development of science, before 1650 few of them were known outside a narrow group of English and European scientists. Furthermore, these men easily combined their work on the new discoveries with equal interest in matters that are nowadays considered to be irrational and superstitious. Nor is it clear that Protestantism, any more than science, was a catalyst of change, a solvent of old attitudes and beliefs. Historians looking back to the period before 1650 are too prone to characterize it as one which makes a clear break with the Middle Ages, in the history of ideas no less than in the history of government. In both cases this approach can produce a distorted

⁵¹ M. J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c.1550–1700* (2000); and S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c.1550–1640* (2000). The quotation is from Hindle, p. 23.

picture: what is unusual is highlighted as the norm and the most common ideas and beliefs of the period are obscured.

Education and literacy: an 'educational revolution'?

Educational opportunities for boys were plentiful in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For the sons of landed gentlemen, education often began at home or in the household of a neighbouring magnate. Some gentlemen employed tutors, though education in large households was not confined to academic subjects. Boys learned how to run households and estates by service as household officials, which was seen as

a gentlemanly profession. . . . [It] was in no sort servile, nor the paynes belonging it any pennance, but they ioyed as much in their libertie, and florished as freshe in their profession as any other; their fare was always of the best, their apparell fine, neate, handsome and comely, their credite and esteeme alwayes equall with their birth and calling in good regarde.⁵²

For other boys also education often began outside a school. Promising youngsters might be singled out to be taught to read and write by local clergymen or curates. Others who were able attended village 'petty' schools, which attempted to teach basic reading and writing. Naturally, the quality of such schools varied. In the Shropshire village of Myddle there can be little doubt which was the better school: Mr Osmar Hill ran a school at Bilmarsh Farm, which had a good local reputation and 'many gentlemen's sons of good quality were his schollers', while Mr Twyford merely 'taught neighbours' children to read and his wife taught women to sew, and make needle workes'.⁵³ Only after learning to read was a boy supposed to enter a grammar school to be taught to read and write Latin. Both petty and grammar schools were abundant in the early seventeenth century in all parts of the country that have been studied. Between 1574 and 1628 most Cambridgeshire villages had a schoolmaster; in early seventeenth-century West Sussex there was a petty or grammar school in at least twenty towns and villages; seventy schoolmasters were licensed to teach in Leicestershire between 1600 and 1640; in the same period there were thirty-eight teachers in Canterbury, twelve schools in Faversham and twenty-eight in Maidstone in Kent. It has been estimated that between 1560 and 1640 over £293,000 were given by individuals for the establishment of grammar schools, and that 142 new grammar schools were established between 1603 and 1649. These statistics probably underestimate the scale of educational provision because many unendowed schools and unlicensed teachers are hidden from the records. There is also some indication that schoolteachers were becoming better qualified; from the 1580s to the 1630s the

⁵² *A Health to the Gentlemanly Profession of Serving Men* by I. M., 1598 (Shakespeare Association Facsimiles no. 3, 1931), sig. C3.

⁵³ Quoted in D. Hey, *An English Rural Community: Myddle under the Tudors and Stuarts* (1974), p. 189.

percentage of teachers with degrees, licensed to teach in the diocese of London, more than doubled.⁵⁴

Numerous contemporary treatises reflect the high value placed by many on education to produce an educated magistracy and to promote Protestantism by increasing the ability to read and interpret the Bible. Higher education, as well as elementary and secondary education, consequently flourished. New colleges were founded at Oxford and Cambridge: Jesus and Wadham at Oxford in 1571 and 1612, Emmanuel and Sidney Sussex at Cambridge in 1584 and 1596. Even more striking is the apparent increase in the numbers admitted to the universities in the same period, rising from under 800 a year in 1560 to a peak of over 1,200 a year in the 1630s. Professor Stone concludes that this represented a proportion of the seventeen- to eighteen-year-old age group at university that was not exceeded until three centuries later.⁵⁵ Many undergraduates did not stay to take a degree. After a year many sons of landed gentlemen went to one of the Inns of Court to gain a smattering of legal knowledge to help them in the administration of their estates. In the early seventeenth century, especially after the establishment of European peace in 1604 and 1609, it was becoming customary for them to complete their education by foreign travel. The Grand Tour was established as a normal part of a gentleman's education, despite great parental concern, due not only to its expense and the opportunities it gave young men to enjoy pleasures forbidden them at home. It was also felt unfortunate that the major European centres of culture were also hotbeds of Catholicism, and in any case early seventeenth-century gentlemen were no less distrustful of foreigners than their descendants in the reigns of William III and Queen Anne. Sir Henry Slingsby of Scriven in Yorkshire told his son in 1610 to 'take heed what companie he keepes in too familiar a fashion for the frenche are of an ill conversacon and full of many loathsome diseases'.⁵⁶

Stone believes that not only were educational opportunities abundant in this period, but there was an increase in the provision and an improvement in the quality of education between 1560 and 1640 that amounted to 'an educational revolution'. This raises two associated questions: how extensive were educational opportunities and how high were educational standards before 1560; and how can one measure changes in educational standards after 1560? Too often the argument that there was a marked improvement in education after 1560 minimizes the later medieval expansion of English education. Between 1350 and 1529 six Oxford colleges and nine Cambridge colleges were founded. Although there are few statistics, many grammar schools were also founded in this period. The historian of education in the later Middle Ages

⁵⁴ M. Spufford, 'The schooling of the peasantry in Cambridgeshire 1575–1700', in J. Thirsk, ed., *Land, Church and People* (1970), pp. 112–47; A. Fletcher, *A County Community in Peace and War: Sussex 1600–60* (1975), pp. 34–5; B. Simon, ed., *Education in Leicestershire 1540–1940* (1968), p. 41; P. Clark, 'The ownership of books in England 1560–1640: the example of some Kentish townsfolk', in L. Stone, ed., *Schooling and Society: studies in the history of education* (1976), p. 106; Jordan, *Philanthropy*, p. 283; D. Cressy, ed., *Education in Tudor and Stuart England* (1975), p. 10.

⁵⁵ L. Stone, 'The educational revolution in England 1560–1640', *P. & P.*, XXVIII (1964), p. 53.

⁵⁶ Cliffe, *Yorkshire Gentry*, p. 78.

cannot be more exact because of the scarcity of primary sources. Licensing of schoolteachers and diocesan visitation recording of schools did not begin until the 1550s. Matriculation registers were not regularly kept at Cambridge until 1544 and at Oxford until 1571. The historian of English education from the mid-sixteenth century onwards is consequently faced with an abundance of sources. What he or she must guard against is assuming that this by itself is proof of anything other than an improvement in educational administration and record keeping.⁵⁷

The difficulties of measuring educational changes in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are illustrated by the research on the extent of literacy in this period. Some of the evidence used for this purpose is of dubious value. Clearly it would be wrong to assume that those convicted criminals who recited 'the neck verse' to prove that they were beneficed clergymen and so exempted from corporal punishment, were actually reading the passage. A more probable indicator of literacy is the ability to write one's name instead of signing documents with a cross mark, especially since it was common in the early seventeenth century to learn to read before learning to write. (One wonders, though, how many people simply learned to write their name and nothing else.) Using a sample of nearly 6,000 signatures to depositions in ecclesiastical courts from 1530 to 1750 as evidence of literacy, David Cressy concludes that there was a marked increase in literacy in the last decades of the sixteenth century until by 1600 one-third of the male population could read and write. But he does concede that over the whole period there was 'no steady cumulative progress', only 'irregular fluctuation'. Moreover, illiteracy persisted among the labouring poor, farmers, skilled craftsmen, and most women. Literacy was confined to the landed elite, wealthy merchants, shopkeepers and professional men.⁵⁸ In some Kentish towns more people owned books in 1640 than in 1580, but the ownership of books was restricted to propertied males. When Bartholomew Dann of Faversham found his wife 'reading and leaving her book in some place . . . he would catch the book out of her hands and tear it in pieces or otherwise fling it away'.⁵⁹ Significantly, those who had the temerity to suggest that women should be educated had to assure their readers that the male dominance of society would not be thereby disrupted.

We are not advising that women be educated in such a way that their tendency to curiosity shall be developed, but so that their sincerity and contentedness may be increased, and this chiefly in those things which it becomes a woman to know and to do; that is to say, all that enables her to look after her husband and to promote the welfare of her husband and her family.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Russell, 'The influx of commoners into the university of Oxford before 1581: an optical illusion?', *E.H.R.*, XCII (1977), pp. 721–5; N. Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (1973).

⁵⁸ D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: reading and writing in early modern England* (1980); 'Levels of illiteracy in England 1530–1730', *H.J.*, XX (1977), pp. 1–23 and 'Literacy in seventeenth-century England: more evidence', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, VIII (1977), pp. 141–50.

⁵⁹ Clark, 'Ownership of books', p. 97.

⁶⁰ Cressy, ed., *Education in Tudor and Stuart England*, p. 111.

So in 1657 wrote Jacob Comenius, one of the most liberal men produced by the seventeenth century. The same fears that his words were designed to calm were also felt about the consequences of popular education. Too many schools, felt Sir Francis Bacon in 1611, caused on the one hand a lack

both of servants for husbandry and apprentices for trade; and on the other side, there being more scholars bred than the state can prefer and employ, and the active part of that life not bearing a proportion to the preparative, it must needs fall out that many persons will be bred unfit for other vocations and unprofitable for that in which they are brought up, which fills the realm full of indigent, idle and wanton people, which are but *materia rerum novarum*.⁶¹

It is likely that his fears were unfounded. For the mass of English people at that time, the task of gaining enough to eat left no spare time for education. If there was an ‘educational revolution’ before the middle of the century, it did not extend to women or to the poor.

How ‘modern’ were the subjects taught in the schools and universities of early seventeenth-century England? This ought to be an easy question, since the curricula they were to adopt were laid down in school regulations and university statutes. However, these were not necessarily adhered to, especially by the universities. One can be more certain about what was taught in grammar schools, in which the curriculum was dominated by religious and classical subjects, especially the teaching of Latin grammar. The same set books recur in early seventeenth-century grammar school syllabuses: the Catechism, Psalter, Book of Common Prayer, Bible, a Latin grammar textbook (usually William Lily’s written in the early sixteenth century) and various selected classical authors with ‘lewd or superstitious books or ballads’ weeded out, and ‘all filthy places in the poets’ quickly passed over.⁶² In vain, some writers urged schools to adopt a more practical and vocation-orientated syllabus. In 1570 Humphrey Gilbert proposed the establishment of a school which would teach mathematics, horse riding, map making, navigation, biology and other subjects.⁶³ Significantly, reformers in the revolutionary decades of the mid-seventeenth century were still recommending similar things.

What was taught in early seventeenth-century universities is the subject of debate which is difficult to resolve because different types of source material produce conflicting accounts. University statutes and examination requirements indicate that the formal curriculum of universities was dominated by scholasticism, and that new ideas, like those in science, made little headway. It is true that in 1619 Oxford established the Savilian professorship in geometry and astronomy, the Sadlerian chair of natural philosophy and the Tolmins lecture in anatomy. But by and large the formal university

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 24–5.

⁶² John Brinsley, in 1612, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 84, 88.

⁶³ *The Erection of an Academy in London for Education of Her Majesties Wardes, and Others the Youth of Nobility and Gentlemen*, printed in *Archaeologia*, XXI (1827), pp. 508–20.

institutions ignored the new science. What is less certain is the extent to which individual tutors taught new ideas which were outside the official syllabus. By its very nature such teaching is ill-recorded, but it is known that there were some lecturers who propounded new ideas, such as the mathematicians William Oughtred at King's Hall, Cambridge, and Thomas Allen at Gloucester Hall, Oxford.⁶⁴ Many of these had connections with London and with Gresham College. The most famous is Henry Briggs, who in 1620 left Gresham to take the Savilian chair in geometry at Oxford. What one would like to know is how typical such teachers were. The surviving evidence is inconclusive, but if students' notebooks are a guide to what was taught (not always a totally safe assumption!) then the syllabus at Oxford and Cambridge at that time was very conservative and narrow. 'Vera et sana philosophia est vera Aristotelica', jotted down Lawrence Bretton of Queens' College, Cambridge, in his student notebook in the 1630s.⁶⁵ Aristotelian philosophy seems to have reigned supreme at the universities before the English Revolution.

The scientific revolution

The concept of 'the scientific revolution' to describe changes in the intellectual climate of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is more acceptable than the idea of 'an educational revolution'. It is true that there were medieval scientists, like the thirteenth-century Oxford scholars Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon, who emphasized the importance of observation and experimentation. But it was not until three centuries later that more than a handful of scientists began to question long-held conclusions about man and his environment which were based on traditional methodology. Medieval science was rooted in the works of the Greek philosophers Galen and Ptolemy who lived in the second century AD, and Aristotle who lived in the fourth century BC. Medical principles were based on the Galenic concepts of anatomy and physiology: the body was composed of four basic 'humours', phlegm, blood, black bile and yellow bile, and, since both physical and psychological disorders were caused by a superfluity of one of these humours, conventional medical remedies consisted of ways of purging the body of it. Galen had done some dissection, but mainly on apes not humans, and throughout the Middle Ages his conclusions were accepted and not tested by experiments and dissections of the human body. The Ptolemaic view of a finite, earth-centred universe, in which the moon, sun and planets revolved round a stationary earth, was as ancient as Galen's anatomy and as deeply rooted in medieval thought. Both derived heavily from Aristotle's theories about physics and the universe, especially his views that matter consisted of only four elements, fire, earth, water and air, and that bodies moved only in two ways, in straight lines and in circles. The validity of these fundamental principles was tested not by experiment, but by reason, and on

⁶⁴ M. Feingold, *The Mathematician's Apprenticeship: science, universities and society in England 1560–1640* (1984); C. Webster, *The Great Instauration: science, medicine and reform 1626–60* (1975), p. 126.

⁶⁵ H. Kearney, *Scholars and Gentlemen: universities and society in pre-industrial Britain 1500–1700* (1970), p. 84.

the basis of these principles broad theories were built by logical deduction. By the sixteenth century the ‘ancients’ and their ideas were so revered that the intellectual climate was against discovery; it was believed that there was little left to be discovered about natural phenomena. Any change was likely to be a change for the worse: old ways and old books were the best. This is, of course, the antithesis of the equally unfounded belief in progress and the modern tendency to regard new books as better than old books.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, scientists began to question the deductive method of Aristotelian philosophy and in so doing they discovered some of the fundamental principles of modern science. The first major developments were in the fields of anatomy and astronomy, which were marked by the publication in 1543 of two treatises, the Italian Vesalius’s *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica* and the Pole Copernicus’s *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*. Both were implicit attacks on Greek science. Vesalius’s description of human anatomy was based on dissections of the human body, and Copernicus’s theory that the sun, not the earth, was the centre of the universe was the result of observation. Copernicus’s work was developed by other astronomers, Tycho Brahe, a Dane, Johannes Kepler, a German, and Galileo Galilei, an Italian. It is clear, then, that the emerging scientific movement was a European one, and a notable feature of it is the way scholars of different nationalities freely communicated their research conclusions to each other. The reasons for the timing of these remarkable developments remain controversial, but that they were a European phenomenon suggests that they had more powerful impulses behind them than English Puritanism.

This is not to say that Englishmen did not participate in the European scientific movement. Already by the early seventeenth century much had been achieved in England, notably by mathematicians and astronomers like Robert Recorde, John Dee, Thomas Digges and Thomas Harriot (who carried on his work into the seventeenth century before he died in 1621), and by William Gilbert, whose work on magnetism was published in 1600. One of the most important contributions of Elizabeth’s reign to English science in the seventeenth century was the foundation of Gresham College in 1597 under the terms of the will of the financier Sir Thomas Gresham. He stipulated that this London college should have seven professorships, in law, rhetoric, divinity, music, physics, geometry and astronomy, and that lectures should be in both Latin and English. Gresham College was a research and a teaching institution, and many of the notable developments in early seventeenth-century English science were connected with it because of the wide contacts of Henry Briggs, Gresham’s professor of anatomy, whom Christopher Hill calls a ‘contact and public relations man’.⁶⁶ The specific English contributions to European science in the early seventeenth century were in the spheres of mathematics and medicine. A crucial feature of the new science was its reliance on statistics and mathematical logic as the vital proof of truths rather than on deductive logic. Therefore John Napier’s invention of logarithms (his *Descriptio* was published in 1614) and its subsequent development and popularization by Henry Briggs were

⁶⁶ Christopher Hill, *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (1965), p. 38.

important aids to the new experimental science. Arguably of even greater importance in the history of mathematics is William Oughtred, the clergyman, who invented trigonometry and who had an extensive reputation as a great teacher. William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood (his *De Motu Cordis et Sanguinis* was published in 1628) is the most important English contribution to the new science before the middle of the century. Significantly, it demonstrates the close links of English science with the Continent, since Harvey developed his idea after studying at Padua University where the tradition established by Vesalius was maintained by Hieronymus Fabricius. Unlike all the scientists mentioned so far there is no agreement about the role and significance of Sir Francis Bacon in the scientific movement in the early years of the century. However, one does not have to believe that he was the creator of the new experimental science or that he was very influential before 1640 (the first proposition is certainly wrong and the second very doubtful) to suggest that his views are typical of the new science. He rejected the ideas of 'the ancients' and recommended a search for new scientific explanations by experiment, observation and induction. The results of experiments were to be collected by a 'College of Natural History' with the aim of using scientific knowledge for the progress of mankind. 'The true and lawful goal of the sciences', he wrote, 'is none other than this: that human life be endowed with new discoveries and power.'⁶⁷

The philosophical implications of the new science as illustrated in the writings of Bacon are without doubt one of the greatest developments in modern European thought: the replacement of the passive acceptance of traditional, unchallenged truths, which were revered because they were ancient, by the idea of progress, that man can change his condition and environment for the better. However, important as this is, it would be wrong to exaggerate the modernity of the 'natural philosophers' of the early seventeenth century and the break they represented with the past. Maybe even in this respect, as in some others (as has been seen), 'revolution' is a misleading concept for historians to use. Some historians of science have recently abandoned a 'tunnel vision' approach aimed primarily at discovering the antecedents of modern scientific attitudes and values, and have instead endeavoured to investigate ideas in the historical context in which they were developed.⁶⁸ One of the principal discoveries of those taking this approach is that in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the modern borderline between rational science and irrational, occult and esoteric investigations did not exist. Scientists sought explanations in mystical tradition and experience as much as in the mechanical world. John Dee combined his mathematical work with

⁶⁷ Quoted in A. R. Hall, *The Scientific Revolution 1500–1800: the formation of modern scientific attitudes* (2nd edn., 1962), p. 165.

⁶⁸ The editors' introduction in R. S. Westman and D. C. Lindberg, eds., *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution* (1990) is a good guide to recent literature on a subject that is sometimes written about by historians who appear not to attempt to make their subject accessible to those who are unfamiliar with it. The exceptions in this book (in addition to the editors' introduction) are the articles by J. T. Coke, 'The new philosophy of medicine in seventeenth-century England' and M. Hunter, 'Science and heterodoxy: an early modern problem resolved'.

astrology and spiritualism. John Napier used his mathematical talents to unravel prophecies in the Book of Revelation that forecast the struggle against Antichrist and the end of the world, and to calculate the chronology of their fulfilment. William Gilbert, the first person to demonstrate the magneticism of the earth by careful experiments, believed that the earth was alive. ‘We consider’, he wrote, ‘that the whole universe is animated, and that all the globes, all the stars, and also the noble earth, have been governed, since the beginning by their own appointed souls and have motives of self-conservation.’⁶⁹ Like many other contemporary European scientists, Gilbert was swept along by a current of belief in magic, the revival of Neoplatonism, ‘the last school of ancient pagan philosophy’.⁷⁰ Hermes Trismegistus, who was (wrongly) thought to have been a pre-Christian sage, became a cult figure among intellectuals. Hermeticists considered the universe to be animated by spirits, and matter to be possessed of sympathetic and antipathetic influences, and their aim was to discover these by scientific enquiry in order to control natural phenomena. So influential were the magical beliefs of Renaissance Hermeticism that some historians of science have argued that it played the key role in the attack on Greek science.⁷¹ The most notable illustration is the work of the Swiss Paracelsus on chemical remedies for diseases, which owed much to the Hermetic tradition and was a major attack on Galenic medicine. Paracelsian iatro-chemistry was very influential among scientists in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Clearly there was a great intellectual gulf between them and the modern professional scientist.

How great was the impact of the new science on early seventeenth-century England? Its significance for the future development of science can tempt one to exaggerate its contemporary importance. After reading Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning*, James I is alleged to have remarked that ‘it is like the peace of God, that surpasseth all understanding’.⁷² There is point to James’s witticism. Many of the new ideas were too difficult to follow. It was not until the later years of the century that Harvey’s discovery gained wide acceptance, after the Italian Marcello Malpighi, using an improved microscope, confirmed the existence of the capillaries which Harvey had suggested carried blood from the arteries to the veins. Other discoveries, like that of Copernicus, were too revolutionary to gain widespread acceptance. The Ptolemaic view of the universe, in any case, provided satisfactory explanations of visible astronomical features.⁷³ Even Tycho Brahe did not fully accept the implications of Copernican astronomy. Defenders of the ‘moderns’ like George Hakewill, whose *An Apologie or Declaration of the Power and Providence of God* was published in 1627, were in a minority, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the ‘ancients’ had the better of the literary debate.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Quoted in Antonia McLean, *Humanism and the Rise of Science in Tudor England* (1972), p. 158.

⁷⁰ K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), p. 223.

⁷¹ See especially the works of Frances Yates.

⁷² Quoted in P. M. Rattansi, ‘The social interpretation of science in the seventeenth century’, in P. Mathias, ed., *Science and Society 1600–1900* (1972), p. 18.

⁷³ McLean, *Humanism and the Rise of Science*, p. 108.

⁷⁴ R. F. Jones, *Ancients and Moderns: a study of the rise of the scientific movement in seventeenth-century England* (2nd edn., 1961), esp. pp. 29–35.

Charles Webster has shown how Gresham College ‘was extremely variable in its effectiveness, in both its research and teaching capacities’. Many Gresham professors spent a lot of time on other business. Samuel Hartlib thought that most of them were ‘very idle’. John Greaves, the professor of astronomy, went to the Middle East in 1633 and did not return to London until 1640.⁷⁵ It is true that some members of the landed elite took a fashionable interest in the new science, and these *virtuosi* began to conduct experiments and collect curiosities. But their activities bore only a superficial resemblance to Bacon’s hopes of a massive coordinated research programme. On the contrary, as Professor Stone argues, ‘the quest [by the aristocratic *virtuosi*] for rarities, mechanical, natural, or antiquarian, was the very antithesis of the Baconian ideal. . . . So far from conforming to a rational programme of controlled research, it encouraged the mentality of the fair-ground peep-show.’⁷⁶ Before 1640 the impact of the new science was slight. Its practical application was confined to improvements in navigation, map making and surveying.

Popular beliefs: magic and witchcraft

The beliefs of ordinary men and women in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are one of the most fascinating areas of more recent research. There is, though, no point in minimizing the obstacles in the way of such investigation. The major type of evidence available is printed material, which is hardly a perfect source for discovering the beliefs of people, many of whom were illiterate. In any case, at any time common beliefs are not recorded, simply because they are well known. After the work of Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane, however, there is little doubt that belief in magic was prevalent in early seventeenth-century society, and that it formed part of a popular subculture, separate and distinct from the Hermeticism and mystical beliefs which it has been seen were current in intellectual circles at this time.⁷⁷ In its most striking forms, popular belief in magic in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries manifested itself in two major ways.

The first is evident in the witchcraft accusations brought before the assize courts in this period. In the early seventeenth century the numbers were fewer than in the 1580s and 1590s, which were the peak years in this respect, but there were more cases than in the later seventeenth century. The accusations reveal a belief in witchcraft of a different type than that prevalent in contemporary Scottish and continental witchcraft trials.⁷⁸ Very few people in England were alleged to be witches who had made covenants with the Devil or who wore distinctive clothes. Most of those accused of witchcraft in England were women, who were usually older than their accusers and

⁷⁵ Webster, *Great Instauration*, pp. 51ff.

⁷⁶ Stone, *Crisis*, p. 717.

⁷⁷ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*; A. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970).

⁷⁸ For Scotland, see C. Lerner, *Enemies of God: the witch-hunt in Scotland* (1983). For continental Europe, see B. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (1987) and G. R. Quaipe, *Godly Zeal and Furious Rage: the witch in early modern Europe* (1987).

who often lived alone. They were charged with having worked maleficent magic, causing harm to the person of the accuser, or death or illness to the accuser's children, relatives or animals. With the exception of the case of Matthew Hopkins, the professional witchfinder who was active in East Anglia in 1645, the initiative in the prosecution of English witches in this period came from their neighbours, not from the magistrates or the ecclesiastical authorities. The second manifestation of popular belief in magic in this period is the existence of people variously called 'cunning' or 'wise' men and women, 'white witches' and 'wizards', who it was believed had powers to work beneficial magic. Healing, recovering stolen goods and discovering those responsible for thefts recur in the few surviving casebooks of cunning men. Many appear to have operated rather like modern psychiatrists, listening to problems brought to them and sometimes succeeding in providing acceptable solutions simply by confirming what their clients already suspected. Others had some success as faith healers and by prescribing herbal medicines. By such means local men and women gained reputations as wise people who had magical powers. Unlike witches, those believed to possess white magic were largely tolerated and rarely brought before the courts in this period.

There is little doubt that many people in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries believed in magic. However, it is slightly disconcerting that much of the evidence is drawn from a county, Essex, where witchcraft prosecutions were numerous and perhaps exceptionally high. Between 1560 and 1700, 299 people were indicted for witchcraft before the assizes in Essex, but only 91 in Kent, 52 in Hertfordshire, 54 in Surrey and 17 in Sussex appeared before the assizes for the same offence.⁷⁹ This discrepancy does raise doubts about the value of witchcraft prosecutions as a gauge by which to measure witchcraft beliefs. At best, they represent only the cases which got to court, and they were dependent on the willingness of the authorities to let them proceed. One cannot, therefore, assume that they are a record of all witchcraft cases, or that when prosecutions became less frequent (from the mid-seventeenth century onwards) popular belief in witchcraft died. Belief in magic was prevalent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but it is not certain that it was more widespread and intense than in earlier or later periods.

Some uncertainty also surrounds attempts to explain the persistent belief in magic. These have been of three major types. First, there are those which attempt to link it to the economic instability of this period. Since population and pressure on resources were increasing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it is argued that people had less and less to give away in the form of charity. Consequently, the medieval tradition of neighbourliness in villages was weakened. Witchcraft cases appear to support this thesis. Many witchcraft accusations arose out of incidents when individuals turned down requests for charity from poor neighbours. As a result, it is argued, the former felt guilty about their callous attitude and, after suffering a misfortune, turned their guilt against those who had been refused charity, by accusing them of witchcraft and of

⁷⁹ C. L. Ewen, *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (1929), p. 99.

being the cause of their misfortune.⁸⁰ A major doubt about this line of argument is whether neighbourliness was a reality in medieval villages and whether it was being eroded in villages in this period.

The second type of explanation is more convincing.⁸¹ The starting point is the fact that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tragedies for which there were no rational explanations happened frequently; conventional medicine was unable to diagnose most human and animal diseases, infant mortality was high and bad harvests were frequent. In the absence of mechanical explanations, people felt that the cause lay in the occult. In pre-Reformation England, the Catholic Church – by means of the confessional role of priests, and belief in the healing capacity of saints and the power of holy water and relics – had provided explanations of and remedies for tragedies. But the Reformation ‘denied the value of the church’s rituals and referred the believer back to the unpredictable mercies of God. If religion continued to be regarded by its adherents as a source of power, then it was a power which was patently much diminished.’⁸² With the protective magic of the Catholic Church removed, it is argued that individuals had to attack the agents of maleficent magic, witches, and so began the rash of witchcraft accusations and trials from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. Speculative though this explanation remains, it is an attractive one. Clearly the work of Thomas and Macfarlane has created a new dimension to social history by establishing the central role of magic in people’s lives.⁸³

The third type of explanation is the more recent emphasis by some historians on the role of the magisterial class in promoting belief in witchcraft. This ‘top-down’ explanation is based on the argument that the educated elite, drawing on views about witchcraft that were common throughout Europe, had a key role in initiating witchcraft prosecutions and were not simply pressed to do this from below.⁸⁴ Their belief in magic and witchcraft, though rooted in different origins, was as strong as that of ordinary men and women in this period.

Religious beliefs

Since most people are themselves genuinely uncertain about their religious faith, it is difficult at any time to discover people’s attitudes to religion. In the early seventeenth

⁸⁰ This is the hypothesis of Macfarlane, *Witchcraft*, pp. 200–6; Keith Thomas presents a slightly modified version of it in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 560–9.

⁸¹ Thomas places more emphasis on this second hypothesis in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. In his 1978 book, *The Origins of English Individualism*, p. 59, Macfarlane concedes that his earlier stress in *Witchcraft* on the transition from neighbourliness to individualism in sixteenth-century communities may have been wrong.

⁸² Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 77.

⁸³ A. Gregory, ‘Witchcraft, politics and “good neighbourhood” in early seventeenth-century Rye’, *P. & P.*, CXXXIII (1991) is a fascinating study of a witchcraft case in 1607 that develops the pioneering ideas of Thomas and Macfarlane. As can be seen from M. Gaskill’s article, ‘The pursuit of reality: recent research into the history of witchcraft’, *H.J.*, vol. 51 (2008), others have tried (and still are trying) to do this. But no clear alternative overall themes have emerged yet to replace Thomas’s and MacFarlane’s clear conclusions.

⁸⁴ J. Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: witchcraft in England 1550–1750* (1996).

century this is doubly difficult because religious uniformity was imposed by the State. Given the severe statutory penalties for nonconformity, it is hardly surprising that nonconformists often hid their real faith by occasional attendance at a parish church, or that sympathetic magistrates sometimes did not enforce the penal laws. The recusant Catholic who refused to attend a parish church and was proceeded against by the authorities is relatively easy to identify, but this is not true of those who practised Catholicism in the privacy of their own homes and who also attended a parish church. The problem facing the historian as far as non-Catholics are concerned is one of categorization as well as of identification. Did Protestantism outside the State Church exist, either in its Presbyterian form of a national Church without bishops, or its separatist form of independent congregations following their own forms of worship and liturgy? Among those who were committed to the State Church was there a clear distinction between ‘Anglicans’ and ‘Puritans’? Finally, were there people in the early seventeenth century who were totally indifferent to religion?

Indifference

The last question may seem irrelevant to those accustomed to seeing this as a period in which religion played a central role in everyone’s life. Keith Thomas believes that this is a false assumption. ‘It can be confidently said that not all Tudor and Stuart Englishmen went to some kind of church, that many of those who did went with considerable reluctance, and that a certain proportion remained throughout their lives utterly ignorant of the elementary tenets of Christian dogma.’⁸⁵ There is considerable circumstantial evidence for this view. In many parishes the churches were not large enough to seat all the members of the community. The authorities often tried to impose religious uniformity on ‘the better sort’, not on the poorer classes. Moreover, it is likely that enforcement of religious legislation was laxer in areas where parishes were large, communities scattered and the power of the Church weak, as in the forest areas of Sussex and Kent and the pastoral regions of the north-west. In 1607 John Norden found that in areas of

great and spacious wastes, mountains and heaths . . . the people [are] given to little or no kind of labour, living very hardly with oaten bread, sour whey, and goats’ milk, dwelling far from any church or chapel, and are as ignorant of God or of any civil course of life as the very savages amongst the infidels.⁸⁶

Of those who attended church, some misbehaved, ‘nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse remarks, told jokes, fell asleep, and even let off guns’.⁸⁷ ‘Some sleep from the beginning to the end [of sermons]’, noted John Angier, a

⁸⁵ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 159. See also Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (Panther edn., 1969), pp. 457–8.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, p. 411.

⁸⁷ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 161.

Lancashire preacher, 'as if they come for no other purpose but to sleep, as if the sabbath were made only to recover the sleep they have lost in the week.'⁸⁸

There is no doubt that religious indifference existed. There is even evidence that some had more serious doubts about Christianity. In 1607 a Wiltshire gentleman, John Derpier of Buttermere, was alleged to have said that 'there was no god and no resurrection and that men died a death like beasts'.⁸⁹ But such extreme scepticism was untypical in the early seventeenth century.⁹⁰ Moreover, it is possible to exaggerate the extent of popular religious apathy and indifference at this time. Margaret Spufford characterizes the mental world of some Cambridge villagers in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as 'a society in which even the humblest members, the very poor, and the women, and those living in physical isolation, thought deeply on religious matters and were often profoundly influenced by them'.⁹¹ As will be seen, Protestantism, and to a lesser extent Catholicism, played a great part in the lives of most men and women in early Stuart England.

Catholicism

Among ordinary people in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Catholicism was strongest in the areas that contemporaries called 'the dark corners of the land',⁹² where there were few Protestant preachers and existing clergymen were poorly paid and educated. In Lancashire there was 'widespread popular Catholicism', and in Wales 'half-understood relics of the missal and breviary survived in the home for generations after they had been banished from the church'.⁹³ These remnants of unreformed Catholicism in areas where the Reformation had made little impact are often difficult to distinguish from magical beliefs. In 1628 Benjamin Rudyerd talked in the House of Commons about 'the utmost skirts of the North, where the prayers of the common people are more like spells and charms than devotions'.⁹⁴ An assault was made on popular Catholicism by a Protestant campaign of evangelization by preachers and lecturers and by endowment of schools in 'the dark corners of the land'. The appointment by some London merchants in the 1620s of trustees, the Feoffees for Improvements, to buy tithes from landowners to augment church salaries, and the passage of the Act for the Propagation of the Gospel in Wales in 1650 illustrate that the campaign was maintained in the early seventeenth century, and that it was not totally successful. Not all aspects of recent attempts to argue that the process of Protestantization (at the grass-roots, parochial level in post-Reformation England) was

⁸⁸ Quoted in C. Haigh, 'Puritan evangelism in the reign of Elizabeth I', *E.H.R.*, XCII, 1977, pp. 47–8.

⁸⁹ M. Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England 1570–1640* (1987), p. 95.

⁹⁰ M. Hunter, 'The problem of "atheism" in early modern England', *T.R.H.S.*, 5th ser., XXXV (1985), pp. 135–57.

⁹¹ M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities* (1979), p. 350.

⁹² C. Hill, 'Puritans and "the dark corners" of the land', in his *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England* (1974), pp. 3–47.

⁹³ Haigh, 'Puritan evangelism', p. 30; A. H. Dodd, *Studies in Stuart Wales* (1952), p. 53.

⁹⁴ Quoted in M. James, *Family, Lineage and Civil Society* (1974), p. 125.

very slow are convincing. But there is no doubt that England did not become a Protestant country without a long, painful period of adjustment and conversion in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; nor that Protestant evangelists found it much more difficult to capture popular attention than had Catholic propagandists before the Reformation.⁹⁵ Protestants relied largely on words in sermons, lectures, catechisms and Bible readings to get their message across, which did not have the instant appeal of visual aids like paintings, sculptures and woodcut illustrations, as well as pageants, processions and mystery plays which Protestants avoided as ‘popish’ and ‘superstitious’.

Nevertheless, it is likely that the hold of unreformed Catholicism on ordinary people was gradually becoming weaker in the early seventeenth century. This is not true of reformed, Counter-Reformation Catholicism, whose adherents among the landowning classes probably grew in numbers in this period. Clearly the total number of Catholics was tiny: they made up 1.5 per cent of the population of Yorkshire in 1604, and probably amounted to only 35,000 in the whole country. However, by 1640 the total Catholic population had risen to 60,000.⁹⁶ Why did reformed Catholicism not only survive, but make ‘modest progress’ in a country where it was outlawed? The explanation lies mainly in the protection it received from landed gentlemen. Counter-Reformation Catholicism in England was a seigneurial religion, which survived within the shelter of the households of great magnates, some of whom were too powerful to be proceeded against by local magistrates.⁹⁷ In some cases the local magistrate was a Catholic: a Sussex Catholic landowner, Sir Henry Compton of Brambletye, was a JP and deputy lieutenant from the 1620s to 1642 in a county where Catholicism had received strong gentry support in the reign of Elizabeth I.⁹⁸ In other cases the heads of households conformed while their wives did not, which may account for the comparatively large number of devoted women Catholics in the early seventeenth century. Credit for the survival of Catholicism must also be given to the work of Jesuit, Benedictine and secular priests. In the early seventeenth century the infighting between Jesuits and secular priests, which had absorbed much of their energies in the 1580s and 1590s, was temporarily ended. Moreover, they dropped the role of political activism which some of them had adopted in the reign of Elizabeth I. Professor Bossy calls the Gunpowder

⁹⁵ The arguments for a ‘slow’ Reformation are presented in C. Haigh, *The Reformation Revised* (1987) and P. Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (1988), and for a ‘quick’ Reformation in A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (2nd edn., 1989). A dispassionate assessment can be found in P. Marshall, *Reformation England, 1480–1642* (2003), especially ch. 6; R. O’Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* (1986); and S. Doran and C. Durston, *Princes, Pastors and People: the Church and religion in England 1529–1689* (1991), ch. 6.

⁹⁶ A. G. Dickens, ‘The extent and character of recusancy in Yorkshire, 1604’, *Yorks. Archaeological Journal*, XXXVII (1948), p. 33; H. Aveling, ‘Some aspects of Yorkshire Catholic recusant history 1558–1791’, in G. J. Cuming, ed., *Studies in Church History*, IV (1967), p. 110; J. Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570–1850* (1975), p. 188.

⁹⁷ J. Bossy, ‘The character of Elizabethan Catholicism’, *P. & P.*, XXI (1962), pp. 39–57; Stone, *Crisis*, pp. 729–33.

⁹⁸ Fletcher, *Sussex*, p. 97; R. B. Manning, *Religion and Society in Elizabethan Sussex* (1969).

Plot of 1605 ‘the last fling of the Elizabethan tradition of a politically engaged Catholicism’.⁹⁹ Yet, as Peter Marshall writes in his excellent survey of religion after the Reformation, ‘confidence and expansion, rather than ossification or decline from a heroic mid-Elizabethan peak seems to characterize the Catholic experience in the decades before the Civil War. By the 1630s the ratio of priest to people was higher than it was to be for another two centuries.’¹⁰⁰

Protestantism

The word ‘Puritan’ causes so much confusion among students of the history of the period from 1558 to 1660 that it is tempting to abandon it. As will be seen, it would be a mistake to do so. Nevertheless, ‘Puritanism’ is a difficult concept and one which many history students find hard to understand. It was used in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as a term of abuse: ‘that odious and factious name of Puritans’, John Pym called it. Consequently, it was not used at the time with any great precision, and some historians, with less excuse, have followed suit in using it to describe individuals and groups with widely varying views. Christopher Hill rightly calls ‘Puritanism’ ‘an admirable refuge from clarity of thought’.¹⁰¹ Many of the characteristics often described as ‘Puritan’ were shared by many (perhaps the vast majority) of English Protestants, including the hierarchy of the English State and Church until at least 1625. What were the beliefs which were common to most Protestants in early seventeenth-century England?

Information

Protestants and what they believed

- The majority of Protestant churchmen believed in predestination: that an individual’s fate after death was preordained, since the Elect are already chosen. Predestinarianism is based on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. An individual’s salvation after death owes nothing to his or her good works on earth but rests entirely on the grace of Jesus Christ.
- Protestants emphasized the centrality of the Bible and its exposition through preaching. They believed that the central point of church services should be the sermon.

⁹⁹ J. Bossy, ‘The English Catholic Community 1603–25’, in A. G. R. Smith, ed., *The Reign of James VI and I* (1973), p. 95.

¹⁰⁰ Marshall, *Reformation England*, p. 189. It is not difficult to see why anti-Catholicism was so strong in early Stuart England.

¹⁰¹ Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, pp. 1–2.

- They believed that everyone should be able to read, and that the clergy should be educated enough to preach eloquent and intelligent sermons.
- Images were viewed with suspicion as violations of the Second Commandment and largely cleared from churches during the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I.
- The most powerful unifying aspect of Protestantism in this period was anti-Catholicism, both apocalyptic and political. The world-view popularized in influential books like John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* was reinforced from 1618 by the events of the Thirty Years War against the Catholic powers of Europe. European Protestantism seemed threatened by a rising tide of Counter-Reformation Catholicism.
- Most Protestants of the seventeenth century were agreed about the form of church government they wanted: one national Church, a reformed Church but a Church with bishops.

Increasingly during the early seventeenth century, the Church in the form in which it had been established in 1559 gained wide popular acceptance. Martin Ingram's study of church court records in Wiltshire conveys 'the distinct impression that regular attendance at church, and certainly annual participation in the communion, were far more widely accepted by the 1620s and 1630s than they had been in the middle years of Elizabeth I's reign'.¹⁰² The same may have been true of urban attitudes to the Church if the situation in two suburban parishes of London is typical, where between 80 and 98 per cent of all potential communicants received annual communions during the last years of Elizabeth I's reign and the reign of James I.¹⁰³ Slow though the process may have been, by the early seventeenth century the Church as it had been established in 1559 (along with its Book of Common Prayer, traditional festivals like Easter, Whitsuntide, Rogationtide and Christmas, as well as its emphasis on a predestinarian theology, sermons, bishops and a potent anti-Catholicism) had sunk deep roots in English popular culture.

Is it then possible, or even useful, to distinguish between Protestant supporters of the established Church and 'Puritans'? Were there real differences between 'Anglicans' and 'Puritans'? As has been emphasized above, a distinction between Anglicans and other Protestants is difficult to draw, and this remained true until at least 1625. But there is a compelling reason to retain the label 'Puritanism': without it, it would be impossible to identify individuals in early seventeenth-century England whose attitudes to life and death were shaped much more strongly than those of other Anglicans by

¹⁰² Ingram, *Church Courts*, p. 108.

¹⁰³ J. Boulton, 'The limits of formal religion: the administration of Holy Communion in late Elizabethan and early Stuart London', *London Journal*, X (1984).

the Protestant principles outlined above. The differences were ‘of degree, of theological temperature, so to speak, rather than of fundamental principle’. What were the characteristics of these Puritans, ‘the hotter type of Protestants’, or (the word they commonly used to describe themselves) ‘the godly’?¹⁰⁴

Information

Puritans and what they believed

- Godly Puritans had a distinctive lifestyle. Their more intense attitude towards predestinarianism meant that every aspect of their lives was dominated by it.
- They spent their days (and nights) at a high level of spiritual intensity, often undergoing long periods of introspection and self-examination in order to convince themselves that they had been chosen as members of the Elect.
- Prayer and sermons played a major part in the lives of Puritans. Some Puritans travelled outside their own parish to hear a minister whose views they agreed with.
- The godly, too, were much more influenced by anti-Catholicism and millenarianism than most Protestants. This led them to adopt a very militant attitude in seeing the English as the Elect Nation chosen by God to lead the cause of international Calvinism against the forces of Antichrist in the Thirty Years War in the early seventeenth century.
- Puritans believed passionately in the need for a godly reformation. They believed that the Reformation of the mid-sixteenth century was by no means completed and that the Church was, at best, but ‘halfly reformed’. ‘Popish’ relics in church government needed to be abolished, but so also should sin in people’s lives. All this was done not out of opposition to enjoyment for its own sake, but in order to secure God’s blessing.

In the early seventeenth century Puritans were militant Protestants with distinctive lifestyles, who urged reform of the Church. Some of these characteristics are captured well in the lives of individuals. Katherine Gell regularly consulted the divine, Richard Baxter, as she did in 1655 fearing that God had allowed her 17-week baby boy to die and ‘in anger throwne him into hell’. She felt that she ‘should shortly follow & soe [she wrote to Baxter] into a sad condition I fell. I saw noe beame of love light of gods

¹⁰⁴ P. Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1967), pp. 26–7.

countenance nor favour for a long time.¹⁰⁵ Nehemiah Wallington, a godly wood-turner in early seventeenth-century London, was brought to the brink of suicide by his ‘godly doubts’.¹⁰⁶ The godly, too, considered the course of their lives, misfortunes as well as successes, to be dictated by Providence, by the workings of God’s will. Robert Loder, a Berkshire farmer, wrote in 1616: ‘This year in sowing too early I lost (the Lord being the cause thereof, but that the instrument wherewith it pleased him to work) . . . the sum of £10 at least, so exceeding full was my barley with charlock.’¹⁰⁷ Such anxieties were the product of what has been described as ‘experimental’ predestinarianism, the belief that every aspect of life was dominated by the predestinarian creed, to be distinguished from the shallow-rooted ‘credal’ predestinarianism of non-Puritan Protestants.

The sermon-dominated household of the godly and passion for effective preaching can be seen in the lives of other godly people. In 1653 Thomas Taylor instructed all Protestants: ‘Let every master of a family see to what he is called, namely to make his house a little church, to instruct every one of his family in the fear of God, to contain every one of them under holy discipline, to pray with them and for them.’ Unlike other Protestants, Puritan heads of households carried out this instruction to the letter. In William Gouge’s house ‘there were prayers twice daily, three times on Sunday: there was Bible-reading, and children and servants were catechized’.¹⁰⁸ Lady Margaret Hoby of Hackness in Yorkshire meditated privately every day, conducted household prayers and attended church several times a week. Her diary for Friday 21 December 1599 reads:

Afer privat praier I ded a litle, and so went to church: after the sermon I praied, then dined, and, in the after none, was busy tell 5 a clock: then I returned to private praier and examination: after supped, then hard publick praers and, after that, praied privatly, havinge reed a Chapter of the bible, and so went to bed.¹⁰⁹

On Sundays, naturally, the routine of prayer, meditation and worship in Puritan households was much more rigorous. It was common to attend three sermons, take notes, and meet afterwards with other godly people to discuss the contents of the sermon. When a local minister’s views were not approved of, these private meetings could become especially important and serve as alternative services to those offered in the parish church. Some Puritans might travel outside their own parish – ‘gadding’ was the buzzword for this among the godly – to hear a minister whose views were more agreeable. In the 1630s, Lawrence Clarkson felt that the minister of his home town, Preston in Lancashire, was ‘a pitiful superstitious fellow’. Only occasionally did

¹⁰⁵ N. H. Keeble and G. F. Nuttall, eds., *Calendar of the Correspondence of Richard Baxter* (2 vols., 1991), vol. I, p. 191.

¹⁰⁶ P. Seaver, *Wallington’s World: a Puritan artisan in seventeenth-century London* (1985), pp. 22–5.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, pp. 440–1.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Cliffe, *Yorkshire Gentry*, p. 273.

‘true laborious ministers of Christ’ visit Preston, ‘who when they came, would thunder against Superstition, and sharply reprove Sin, and prophaning the Lords-day; which to hear, tears would run down my cheeks for joy’. So he would often travel to Standish and other places ‘where we could hear of a Godly minister, as several times I have gone ten miles, more or less, fasting all the day when my Parents never knew of it, and though I have been weary and hungry, yet I came home rejoycing’.¹¹⁰

The life that best captures the passionate zeal for godly reformation is that of Oliver Cromwell. He was not unique, however. He and many other Protestants had a deeply held conviction that without such ‘a reformation of manners’ to abolish sin in people’s lives they and the nation would lose God’s support, and that God would (as they graphically put it) ‘spit in their face’. Their biblical studies confirmed this view, especially the account they read in the Bible of the eventual success of the Old Testament Israelites in escaping from Egyptian bondage and, after a struggle, inheriting the Promised Land. This triumph was possible only after the Israelites had won God’s blessing by expiating their sins. For the godly of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England the lesson was clear: like the Israelites, the English would inherit the Promised Land of godly reformation only after they had undergone a spiritual ‘reformation of manners’.

This was a mentality that drove some of the godly (including Oliver Cromwell, as will be seen) to become activists. Unlike Catholics, they were not content to practise their religion within their households: Puritans were evangelizers. They wanted to spread their views and to reform the Church and society in accordance with them. Puritans led the demand for an educated clergy: Puritan landlords appointed able preachers to parishes to which they owned the right of presentment; they cooperated with Puritan town corporations in appointing lecturers to preach sermons in addition to those delivered by the appointed minister. Puritans were also zealous reformers; they wanted to rid the Church of what they considered to be popish ceremonies, like bowing at the name of Jesus and the wearing of vestments by clergymen.

However, militant and activist though they were, before 1640 Puritans worked for reform *within* the existing Church. They showed no desire to destroy the framework of the established Church or to get rid of bishops. It was not until the Laudians began to have a real impact on the liturgy and practice of the Church of England in the 1630s that Puritans found themselves in serious conflict with the diocesan authorities.

Were there Protestants in England before 1640 who did not accept the established Church? If there were, they have left few traces. No doubt some of the godly individuals who met together after church services in private religious ‘exercises’ formed the basis for the independent ‘gathered churches’ which were established after 1640 (see pp. 271–2). But between the 1590s and 1640 there is little evidence that independent churches existed. The exception is in London, where in 1616 Henry Jacob established an independent church, from which before 1640 developed various offshoots in the

¹¹⁰ Lawrence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found* (1660, published by *The Rota* at the University of Exeter, 1974), p. 4.

City. However, the total membership of those independent churches was never more than 1,000.¹¹¹ Perhaps also in the 1630s there began a popular anti-episcopalian movement in response to the policies of the Laudian bishops; in Cheshire there is some evidence of this.¹¹² But, although these groups are inevitably obscure, there is little doubt that Independency and anti-episcopalianism in terms of numbers and influence were negligible elements in English Protestantism before 1640.

Moreover, even ‘the hotter type of Protestants’, the Puritans, dissociated themselves from the implication that they intended to change the fundamental structure of the Church or break away from it. It used to be fashionable to stress the revolutionary implications of Puritan ideology, on the grounds that the godly’s emphasis on the individual’s duty to interpret God’s word would create a questioning mentality that, when extended beyond religious topics, would become a radical challenge to the established political and social structure. This is an argument that has now lost a lot of its force, largely because before 1640 the Puritans who can be identified as such were conservative upholders of the status quo. They wanted church reform, but not at the expense of political and social upheavals. When in the early 1640s it appeared that this might be the consequence of reform, many of them drew back even from that. Most Protestants accepted unquestioningly that religious diversity was a sure recipe for anarchy in society. ‘If a toleration were granted’, wrote Thomas Edwardes in 1646, ‘men should never have peace in their families more, or ever after have command of wives, children, servants.’¹¹³ This belief effectively bridled in Puritans any tendency towards radicalism.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, it would be foolish to suggest that the development of many different religious views in post-Reformation England, together with the other major social and intellectual changes that have been discussed in this chapter, did not produce strains and stresses that threatened the stability of early Stuart England. It is important, however, that these destabilizing effects are not exaggerated unduly.

Without any doubt, the religious differences between the godly and non-godly that have been discussed above produced tensions in some English towns and villages in early seventeenth-century England. Many of the reasons for the hostility directed at the godly are reflected in the proceedings of the bishop’s court in Wiltshire in 1624. A young Wiltshire woman, Susan Kent, complained against the spiritual intensity of

¹¹¹ M. Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: the separate churches of London 1616–49* (1977), p. 37. Unlike other London separatists, Jacob maintained contacts with those within the Church. There is evidence of a separatist congregation in Yarmouth and Baptist congregations in London, Lincoln, Coventry, Salisbury and Tiverton from the 1620s onwards: M. R. Watts, *The Dissenters from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (1978), pp. 52–3, 159, 166.

¹¹² J. S. Morrill, *Cheshire 1603–60: county government during the ‘English Revolution’* (1974), p. 20.

¹¹³ Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena*, part 3 (1646), p. 156.

the godly minister in her village, John Lee, rector of Wylke: 'When once he . . . takes his green book in hand', she said, 'we shall have such a deal of bibble babble that I am weary to hear it, and I can then sit down in my seat and take a good nap.' Her reaction to godly preaching is very different from Lawrence Clarkson's ecstatic comment quoted above, and probably more typical of the attitude of a young person in early Stuart England. Susan Kent also reflected the widespread hostility that the godly incurred because of their attacks on popular sports and pastimes on Sundays. 'We had a good parson here before', she is alleged to have said, 'but now we have a puritan . . . A plague or a pox in him that ever he did come hither, and I would have kept our old parson for he never did dislike with [games and dancing]. These proud puritans are up at the top now but I hope they will have a time to come as fast down as ever they come up.'¹¹⁴ From the other side of the religious fence, in the 1620s the young Richard Baxter felt the force of this kind of anger as he sat in his father's godly household in Eaton Constantine in Shropshire on Sundays, trying to read the Scriptures but being distracted by 'the great disturbance of the tabor and pipe and noise in the street'. Occasionally he was tempted to join the fun outside, but (he later wrote in his autobiography) 'when I heard them call my father Puritan, it did much to cure me and alienate me from them; for I considered that my father's exercise of reading the Scripture was better than theirs, and would surely be better thought on by all men at the last; and I considered what it was for that he and the others were thus derided'.¹¹⁵ In the early seventeenth-century Dorset market-town of Dorchester, these kinds of tensions were constant undercurrents before 1640. Townspeople resented the restrictions imposed on them by a town government dominated by a godly elite. The tiny Essex village of Terling, too, witnessed such tensions, caused by the attempts of godly local governors to stamp reformation on an apathetic and hostile community.¹¹⁶

It is essential for a full understanding of the history of early Stuart England that these kinds of religious friction are added to those causes of disaffection already discussed in this and the previous chapter: that is, those arising from the economic and social changes which took place as a result of dramatic rises in population and prices from the early sixteenth century onwards. The two major social changes that stand out are the growing differentiation in the distribution of wealth as the rich got richer and the poor poorer, and the extraordinary expansion of London. One consequence of these changes, when combined with an agrarian economy that struggled to muster its resources to meet the demands of a rising population, was social problems of poverty and deprivation on a scale unprecedented in England since at least the thirteenth century.

What is less certain is whether the resulting social tensions (seen, for example, in Susan Kemp's frustrated anger at the reforming aspirations of the godly and in the food riots that erupted in this period) were a major threat to the social and political stability of early Stuart England. Attempts that have been made in the past to make

¹¹⁴ Ingram, *Church Courts*, p. 121.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (1982), pp. 183–4.

¹¹⁶ Underdown, *Fire from Heaven*; Wrightson and Levine, *Terling*.

direct links between some of the major social changes of this period and the extraordinary political instability that occurred during the 1640s and 1650s do not find much support among historians nowadays (see pp. 169–70). However, one general interpretation of social trends in the period before 1640, which suggests that a major fracture had opened up in English society by the mid-seventeenth century, has received some acceptance in recent years. It is best illustrated in the words of Keith Wrightson, in one of the best general books on the social history of early modern England written in the 1980s:

A deep social cleavage of a new kind had opened up in English society. It was not one simply between wealth and poverty, but between respectable and plebeian culture, and it followed the line which divided not the gentry and the common people but ‘the better sort’ and the mass of the labouring poor. This process of transition was essentially completed by 1660.¹¹⁷

The two central propositions on which this hypothesis are based are open to question. Was there ‘a deep social cleavage’ measured either by wealth or by ‘culture’ in England by the mid-seventeenth century?

As has been seen, there are many qualifications to be made to an overly pessimistic interpretation of economic and social change in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although the price revolution depressed the standards of living of many (especially small farmers and landless labourers who relied largely on wages for their living), not all small farmers were forced off the land in the period before 1640; nor did all (or indeed most) labourers in this period rely on wages as the sole source of their incomes. Moreover, although the scale of agricultural progress in the century or so before 1640 was not spectacular, it was sufficient to enable England to escape the frequent subsistence crises that hit other parts of Europe in this period. Also, as has been seen, the development of private and public poor relief schemes had some success in cushioning the poor from the worst effects of deprivation. The result was to produce a society in which the divisions between rich and poor were not as polarized or as glaring as those in some parts of contemporary continental Europe, or in Ireland and Scotland.

Similar doubts exist about the reality of a division between an elite and plebeian culture along religious lines. The godly were an embattled minority in early Stuart England, but they were not drawn exclusively from one social group. Puritans can be found in all social groups in this period and not simply among ‘the middling sort’ or among ‘the better sort’. Alongside godly peers can be found godly men and women from humble backgrounds. ‘It is premature’, writes Patrick Collinson, ‘simply to equate the godly elite of early Stuart England with a social elite, or even with the broad band lying across the middle rungs of the social ladder.’¹¹⁸ This generalization is supported by Martin Ingram’s study of two Wiltshire villages, Keevil and Wylke,

¹¹⁷ Wrightson, *English Society*, p. 227.

¹¹⁸ P. Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: the Church in English society 1559–1625* (1979), p. 241.

which shows that rector John Lee's godly reform plans (that so offended Susan Kent) 'rapidly ran out of steam'; and that 'the notion that religious commitment was conditioned by social class must be treated with caution'.¹¹⁹

In these circumstances it is difficult to make direct or major links of causation between social changes in this period and the political instability that characterized England after 1640. On closer inspection, the threat to the existing political order posed by the economic and social changes surveyed in these first two chapters was, in reality, much less serious than it seemed to some at the time and than it has seemed to others since. This is not to say that the fears and anxieties that gripped some contemporaries in the face of the economic and social changes that were taking place should be ignored. As will be seen in Part 2, they played as important a part in shaping the attitudes of many people to the political events of early Stuart England as did the rumbling fears that (it will be seen in the next chapter) many had about the future of parliaments.

¹¹⁹ Ingram, *Church Courts*, p. 123.